

National Women's Conference (NWC) Report

11 - 13 February 2016

To have 800 diverse women activists who are passionate about their union and the issues that affect women in this country and across the world in one place is totally awesome. It is especially good to see that Scotland was well represented.

The first meeting I attended was the Scottish Regional meeting chaired by Davina Rankin, chair of the Scottish Women's Committee. In attendance was Viv Thompson, vice chair, Carol Cullen, regional delegate and Catrina Murray from the standing orders committee.

We received an update from the standing orders committee. We were informed of the emergency motions: attach on tax, the autumn budget statement and the Kurdish situation.

There was discussion about a motion put forward on food banks that was ruled out of order because it was not considered a woman's issue. However a motion on food banks was debated at the conference in 2014. Viv advised that there were other motions coming to conference that referenced food banks and members could speak on these so that our point was not lost. We could also speak from a Scottish perspective adding an additional dimension to the debate.

The election of delegates to the National Delegate Conference (NDC) was discussed. Two motions from the NWC had been selected to go forward to NDC:

- Women the refugee crisis and trafficking
- The refugee crisis

We were advised that if we felt there was other pressing motions that we felt should go forward we could put them forward.

Session 1

The first main speaker at conference was Wendy Nicholls, UNISON President. Wendy was supported at conference by the full presidential team. Wendy began by reminding us of the truly threatening time we are facing as a union with the trade union bill or anti trade union bill as we prefer to know it. She reminded us how devastating this bill is to our members and stewards:

- the impact of losing Docas
- the loss of facility time
- the loss of funding
- the loss of the right to campaign

Everyone in the country is affected, no one is exempt:

- those pronounced fit for work and who died shortly thereafter
- the many families who cannot afford their own homes
- changes to pensions
- reductions to pensions in old age

The Tory government is threatening the most vulnerable in society and we cannot forget asylum seekers, where woman and children are dying.

We are being continually dragged through the mire, wages are going down, the gap between the rich and the poor is growing. We need women to support women! Think about the tampon tax. The government is giving but is taking more. It is cutting benefits while allowing tax dodging companies to pay back less than they owe.

It is our job to make the government stop! We need a living wage for all. We have recruited 166k new members, mostly women. The overall percentage of women in UNISON is 78%. We can be proud of the work that we do.

There is bullying and harassment of our sisters who are police staff members. This cannot be allowed to continue. This is a problem that cannot be ignored. UNISON will take action, there needs to be a change in culture, and we will work tirelessly until this is achieved.

We have another hard year ahead of us with many obstacles in our way but we will overcome! Wendy recognised and paid tribute to the women of UNISON, who work, put many hours for UNISON and who have caring responsibilities as well.

Wendy went on to tell us about the president's charity, Biglo School Project, Gambia. Wendy's branch has been involved with the school since 2011. They have recently purchased a freezer for the school. There is a need for a water pump, a toilet block and looking at a water storage tower.

The school has grown over the last few years and now does two learning sessions a day for different children each day. The project is looking to build four new classrooms to give more children the opportunity of an education. All monies collected over the conference weekend will go to this project.

The session then moved on to accept the standing orders report and the NWC annual report. I would summarise the report as follows:

- women should be proud to be part of UNISON
- women should be encouraged to believe in themselves
- learning opportunities within UNISON should be promoted to women

We then moved on to the debate of motions. Rather than give in depth detail of the motions discussed I am going to summarise the issues.

We began by looking at engaging women for the future of UNISON. As the attacks on terms and conditions, benefits and living standards continue, we are expected to do more with less. Under the Tory government our rights as activists are under attack with the aim of demoralising and isolating us in the hope that we will give up. Recruiting new members, improving density and increasing the women's activist base have never been more important. We need to develop and promote tools to assist with women's recruitment, encourage increased participation in our women's network and encourage branches, regions and service groups to involve self organised, young, retired, and migrant worker networks in developing and implementing recruitment and organising strategies aimed at the diversity of women.

We need to encourage women to be more active in UNISON. Austerity has resulted in severe job losses within the public sector and the disappearance of many essential services. Women make up the core part of the workforce and are also the main user of public services and as such they have been impacted disproportionately. It is therefore essential that women are at the forefront of fighting against cuts and that UNISON recognises the vital role they play. We need to encourage regions to work with branches to ensure that work is being undertaken to recruit women activists, advance the work of regions and branches to support cross-sector geographical women's meetings- highlighting the benefit these can bring and produce material that actively encourages women, particularly low paid women into activity.

There is a move by employers to limit the use of flexible working arrangements as well as the introduction of long shifts that disproportionately affects women. Equality impact assessments are often tick box exercises rather than an effective measure of the issue. Increasingly women are finding it more difficult to remain in employment as they battle with childcare or other caring arrangements. This will be even more so with the changes to tax credits removing their ability to finance caring arrangements. Conference called on the NWC to develop and promote a training package to ensure that equality officers, equality representatives and work place representatives have the necessary skills and knowledge to request and use equality impact assessments data to challenge the direct and indirect discrimination the reduction in flexibility is creating. This training needs to be offered via a variety of methods including, but not

restricted to traditional classroom style training, web based training and bespoke branch based training for lay tutors to deliver.

There is a negative impact on flexible working to women's hours and caring responsibilities. Under the 'Children and Families Act 2014' women have a statutory right to ask their employers for a change to their contractual terms and conditions of employment to work flexibly. Flexible working is a way for women to change their working hours to suit their needs. This gives women the ability to fit their work life around home life giving a greater say over their work life balance. Women continue to find it increasingly challenging to balance both caring responsibilities and work, putting them under immense stress and strain. We ask the NWC to campaign to raise awareness on women's rights to flexible working so that women members can be aided to achieve a happy work life balance and take the guilt out of being a mother, daughter or carer.

We must not under estimate the impact that austerity is having on UNISON women. Over the last five years austerity measure have caused the standard of living to fall leaving some women living in poverty. The Trussell Trust say that over the last three years the number of people attending food banks for emergency support has tripled. Women are having to decide whether to heat or eat or to go without in order to feed children and pay debts. We would ask the NWC to work with relevant bodies including UNISON labour link and NEC to renew and increase their efforts in the campaign for a living wage for low paid workers and a decent pay increase for all workers in line with the cost of living, ensure that all members are aware of the help and support that is available and that NWC work with UNISON Labour Link to campaign alongside the Labour party to tackle the impact of austerity on women.

We noted that over 65% of public sector employees are women. The public sector provides better flexible working and maternity benefits for women than the private sector. Changes to benefits will force more women in the Black communities into poverty. Women from Black communities are more likely to have larger families and be in lower paid jobs so will be most affected by housing benefit caps and caps on the benefits working people can receive such as tax credits. Austerity not only affects women it hits Black women the hardest adding more layers of structural oppression and racism to the already multiple layers experienced by the poorest communities. We need to be aware of the impact of austerity cuts on women from Black communities. We call on the National Black Members Committee (NBMC) to lobby the government and opposition parties to use the consideration of race equality in improving employment levels for Black workers.

The cuts are killing us. From domestic violence to increase homelessness, benefit sanctions which have driven people with long term conditions into depression and disabled women labelled as scroungers and vulnerable on the streets and in their homes - austerity is a killing machine. Job losses and increased poverty leads to violent reactions that impact women and girls most. Cuts to care packages put more

pressure on carers - most of whom are women. Austerity is creating victims then further blames them by taking away the vital support services that women need. We need our union to help support those workers who are saying enough is enough across all sectors our union represents, especially nurses, and social workers. When it comes to pay women are saying we can't afford another pay cut. Conference is asks that the NWC work with women's regional SOGs and branch equality officers to make contact with local Woman's Aid and Rape Crisis services to see how UNISON at local level can support their campaigns against cuts in funding and support any fundraising events they are holding, explore the possibility of regional research into how the cuts are affecting women.

UNISON can be proud of the campaigning we have done to highlight and tackle the issue of in work poverty. The Worth It campaign took the message to our communities and women members. Working tax credits and child tax credits were designed to help the low paid workers and low income families. Millions of women depend on these tax credits. The government is also scraping the 'family element' payment for new families after April 2017. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) stated that in work benefits such as tax credits are one of the most effective ways to help in work poverty. The Tory policy of increasing the tax free personal allowance has had little impact over a worker's lifetime. We need to campaign against the cuts to working tax credits and child tax credits that are having a devastating impact for women and our women members. We also need to work within UNISON structures to continue campaigning for decent pay for our women members and toward ending in work poverty and to ensure that UNISON's pay strategy incorporate the aspiration of our women members.

It appears that justice is now only for those who can afford it. The British judicial system was based on the bedrock that justice must not only be done, but be seen to be done as well. It should not be a system where justice should be done only to those who are rich enough to afford it. The UK government's austerity measures are adversely impacting on women's financial security and their access to justice. Access to legal redress whether at Employment Tribunal or for Legal Aid in family issues is being made harder to obtain in contravention of the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. We are asking conference to support relevant campaigns for the restoration of legal aid for family issues including domestic abuse, to work with relevant organisations to develop 'how to' guides to assist women who have no choice but to be 'litigant in person', and to campaign for the repeal of the draconian and unequal laws which rob women of their rights.

Conference welcomed motions passed on domestic violence and abuse at both NWC and NDC in 2015 and believe they give the union a great platform to campaign and fight for women's rights. Work is ongoing for the union and the NWC and calls of the NWC to take account of the additional factors affecting disabled women in this work.

The next meeting I attended was the Health Service Group. Much of the discussion was occupied by the announcement that Jeremy Hunt was going to impose the on junior doctors and the impact that would have on the rest of healthcare services in the UK. It is a serious departure for the government to impose a contract and does not give much faith for future negotiations for any area of the health service. News from the BMA is that it is planning to resist the imposition of this contract. The meeting called on UNISON staff council to formulate a response. It was questioned if this would have any influence in the refresh of Agenda for Change. It was confirmed that UNISON is not in any discussions regarding Agenda for Change.

The meeting was also disturbed to hear bullying and harassment in the NHS is very high. There seems to be a culture within the organisation that makes this allowable. No cases have been won regarding bullying and harassment, it's always the staff member who is disciplined or moved not the manager. We heard from Wales and their use of the Race Equality Standard which covers public sector duty on equality. Black women are at higher risk of discrimination.

Discussion continued on privatisation and outsourcing of services. This is a massive piece of work for UNISON. UNISON is not aware of any contracts that are coming up for renewal. Care UK won the contract for prisoner healthcare in England. As a union we need to be aware of this and get in early to be part of discussions involving our members.

The meeting was asked if UNISON was involved in ageing workforce discussions. An older member shared awareness that the sickness and capability policies we being used as a doubled handed blow to older members. Unison confirmed that information is being prepared and will be circulated to regions and branches before April. Seven day working in the NHS was also discussed. Some members of the group shared that they are already working seven days a week.

Administration staff are working beyond their band ceiling, some members posts are being down banded members are experiencing sexism from woman managers. It was discussed if UNISON would support members in not doing tasks above the grade that they are working at. Lord Carter in discussing productivity in England talked about cutting admin costs by shared services or outsourcing.

All of the concerns raised at the health group meeting will be reported back to NWC.

Session 2

The first session of Friday morning began with more motions. The true cost of childcare for working women was the first topic. In the UK there is approximately 505 million working mothers of dependent children pay for childcare. With the increasing costs of childcare, other household bills and stagnant or reducing salaries, women are finding it harder to stay at work. A survey completed in January 2014 of two

thousand mothers found that 67% of those in work and 64% of those not in work said the high cost of childcare is a barrier to taking on more employment. Between 2009 and 2014 childcare cost rose by 27% and this is expected to continue.

NWC believes that sexism in the workplace is still a force to be challenged and that until it is swept away women will not achieve equality with men in respect of earnings, status or power. The way in which young women are patronised, harassed and bullied in the workplace only serves to reinforce stereotypes that young workers are of less worth than older workers. The situation is compounded by the continuing disgrace of women being paid less than their male counterparts.

At this point motions were paused for the next speaker to WNC. Naz Shah, Labour MP for Bradford West. Naz shared her own story. Born in Bradford, Naz was abandoned by her father when six years old. Age twelve she was sent to Pakistan to avoid her mother, Zoorah's, violent partner, whom Zoorah fatally poisoned because she believed he was planning to sexually abuse her daughters. She served fourteen years in prison for his murder. While in Pakistan, Shah was forced into an arranged marriage.

Before being elected as an MP, Shah was the chair of mental health charity, Sharing Voices Bradford, and had previously worked as a carer for disabled people, as an NHS Commissioner and a director for a regional association supporting local councils. Naz won the Bradford West constituency with a majority of 11,420 over George Galloway in May 2015.

Naz shared her personal journey and her journey into politics. She believes that the present government has failed to grasp the issues facing women. There are restricted options for women:

- women's pay gap
- inequity and disparity in the workplace
- the apprenticeship pay gap for women stands at 21%
- insecure workplace puts pressure on women
- savings are being made at women's expense
- universal credit will affect women and put pressure on family budgets
- the rate of change cannot keep pace with government policies
- restrictive for those in workplace to bring tribunal action

Naz believes that the government is forcing equality backward. Cuts have fallen on councils, austerity brings its own issues, and the big society has shrunk. Labour need to find a credible alternative. The culture of low wages cannot continue in a country that is prospering despite personal debt rising. Naz encouraged the women of UNISON to stand together and make a difference for our members.

I attended a seminar on women's progression and leadership in UNISON. The session was hosted by Tressa Donnagon , Bronwyn McKenna and Fiona Roberts. The TUC did an audit of the top ten unions with a membership of over 150k the ratio of current general secretaries is 3 women to 7 men. We were encouraged to look into the leadership programme for women at Ruskin Hall.

The proportion of women in UNISON is 79%. Women are under represented among traditional roles in the union. Hearts and minds must be changed; we have good role models, Wendy Nicholls, UNISON President, Gloria Mills, President ETUC and Liz Snape TUC President. We also have good role models within UNISON Bronwyn McKenna assistant general secretary and Eleanor Smith ex President UNISON. Bronwyn got into involved because she felt there was no means to challenge. She feels that collective action is the only way to challenge and the key is putting your trust in others who have a common aim. She studies law at university and became interested in employment law and discrimination gaining experience while working for Thompsons. When the post came up for assistant general secretary, she knew it was the post for her and she went for it and got it. Being a leader doesn't always mean you need a loud voice, you can be quiet, powerful and influential. We need to make things better for ourselves and others. There is a high rate of burnout in leadership so you need to look after yourself. Finding a mentor is a good idea, someone who can guide and encourage you. Bronwyn encouraged members to volunteer. Trust your inner voice and speak up. It is getting harder to support and encourage women.

Eleanor shared that her experience and discrimination was similar to Bronwyn's. She became a NUPE steward in 1988 but found her branch secretary un-encouraging. In 1988 she became active in her regional office but was not given any cases. She applied to become branch secretary with the support of her regional officer. Eleanor started going to conference and got involved in SOGs and the regional council. She went for the position of assistant convenor in 2002, and shared that she felt that she had to prove herself not only as a woman but as a black woman. Eleanor was invited to the NEC in 2004 - don't turn opportunities down you never know if they will come again! Eleanor attended the leadership school which helped her to give that extra bit. She was elected by NEC colleagues to the Presidency of UNISON in 2012. Eleanor feels that the traits of a leader are, encouraging, respecting, there for everyone, approachable and that you care. Eleanor observed that some women get into roles and become a man, they lose their caring side. Eleanor is proud to have been UNISON president and is excited that the next president will be Black.

Fiona is the regional women's organiser for the South East. She began by telling us a little of the history of women as far back as 1886, when Clementina Black was one of the first women to stand up and make a difference. Fiona began as a project worker for year to work with women to identify their training needs. After analysis a Women's Leadership Training Package. The training is run by Ruskin College,

Oxford. There are several other courses available from Ruskin College that may be of interest including:

- Media and public speaking
- Writing speeches
- Management skills and time management

Fiona encouraged those interested to take a look at the prospectus, or have a look at the website. She suggested that if possible find a mentor or support within your branch or region. Fiona concluded by reminding us that the knowledge is out there for us to find and to use for our benefit.

The next meeting I attended was the Disabled Members Caucus. This meeting was led by Viv Thompson, Ronna Anderson and Liz Cameron. We were advised that there are two disabled Network meetings on 30 June and 4 August. We discussed the access needs of disabled women attending the conference; we were reminded that we need to let the branch know, if they are booking the accommodation, what our requirements are. It was asked if disabled people coming to conference could come the day before and stay until the day after to travel, to make it easier for them to rest before and after conference. This is a requirement that can be accommodated through branch when accommodation is being booked.

We discussed the six motions that were being put forward to NDC. There was a question about what was a reasonable adjustment. This was explained as a measure that can be taken to assist disabled people in the workplace or in coming to conference the example of coming down the day before and returning the day after was cited as an example of a reasonable adjustment. Delegates were advised that if there was a problem within their branch or workplace they should contact their regional disabled group.

It was asked for a motion for branches to set aside funding for reasonable adjustments. It was advised that this is already covered in the rule book and UNISON devised a document in 2004 which is still an excellent tool and can be obtained through the website or from national office entitled 'Proving Disability and Reasonable Adjustments.'

It was acknowledged that everyone's disabled needs are different, and that we need to take responsibility for ourselves in making sure that our needs are met.

Session 3

Session 3 began with a statement from Danielle Tiplady, a student nurse, who spoke eloquently on NHS bursaries for student nurses. Danielle started the bursary campaign and was joined by 500 people outside St Mary's Hospital London in support of keeping the student bursaries. The government plans to do away with

them and offer loans instead. This would mean that thousands of student nurses would qualify with an additional debt around £50k on their shoulders. Danielle has met with MPs to discuss this, she has been to Westminster to be involved in the debate. She shared that she had seen junior doctors cry as the contract was being imposed on them. Make no mistake the government are coming for student nurses next, they want student nurses to fail which will destroy the NHS and leave it wide open for privatisation. Danielle asked that we stand with her and all the student nurses in the country to oppose the cessation of student bursaries.

The next speaker at conference was Dave Prentice who began by assuring Danielle that UNISON would be with them at the next and every demonstration they have supporting the student nurses. He reminded us that there is already a massive shortage of student nurses within the NHS and this will do nothing to help.

Dave spoke about the disaster for the NHS with the contract for junior doctors being imposed. He suspects that many junior doctors will leave England as a result of the imposition of this contract. As the biggest union in the NHS UNISON cannot stay silent, and will not stay silent, we will speak out in support of our colleagues.

Dave said that he had enjoyed the support of the women's conference for many years and he believed that the women's conference was at the heart of the union and our bargaining agenda. He reminded us that this week was love UNISON week and asked us to get involved in promoting this. Dave took time to pay tribute to June Poole who had served UNISON and the women's conference well for many years.

Dave acknowledged the difficult year that we have all experienced as members of the union, he was pleased to see 800 women coming together at conference, the biggest women's conference yet. There were 700 members at the recent Black members conference, even during these difficult times the numbers attending conferences are growing.

78% of the total membership of UNISON are women, Dave believes that this contributes to the campaigning union that UNISON is. We are being seen as we stand up for our rights and as we stand up for equality. Dave said that there has never been a more important time to be at the heart of the union and we need to be a listening union, we need to hear our members, consult and respond to them. He reiterated the importance of stewards and representatives being close to our members and standing strong, united, and representing in these difficult times.

We have now suffered a decade of damage inflicted by the Tory government but we are now in perilous times when even the prime minister's mother is disagreeing with him in the closing of children's services. Even his aunt disagrees with him. Dave said that the prime minister has sold the family silver, by introducing the bedroom tax, the pay freeze for public sector workers, and in taking away tax credits. These affect our people, half a million jobs in the public sector have been lost and there are still cuts of 320k to come.

The Tory government has tried to stop us campaigning and through the Trade Union bill they are attacking our rights, women will be hit hardest by their plans. Despite there being no complaints from employers the government want to stop Docas payments. This would mean that we would have to sign up all our members again to pay by direct debit. There is fighting in the House of Lords as we speak over the TU bill. It is not only an attack on TU rights in this country if it is an attack on the women of this country.

The restrictions to legal aid mean that many women cannot afford to be represented in court. To take a case to tribunal the cost is £1200. Women have no one to represent them, if they chose to defend themselves it means they are faced by their accuser in court. Sex discrimination cases have dropped by 83% in two years.

Dave assured us that no law would stop UNISON fighting for the rights of its members. The pay gap has grown by 17% in the private sector and 11% in the public sector. Large companies will be required to declare the pay gap in their organisation by 2018 but there is no action required to reduce this.

We cannot afford another half century to get to where we need to be. Women are experiencing extreme levels of pregnancy discrimination. We need to oppose this government and the damage it is doing. Under Jeremy Corbin there is hope that things can be turned around.

- We need the labour party to stop fighting and stand up for us
- We need the labour party to come together and work with us
- We need a labour government to stop the cuts in public services
- We need a labour government to say 'no' to the privatisation of the NHS
- We need a labour government to stop the selloff of public services

We cannot justify replacing trident with the social needs we have within our country. Our union has been underestimated by the government, we are a cohesive union. We have met with Lords, MPs and Bishops. While our members are under attack we are still getting on with the job providing essential services within our communities despite the pressures we are under we are still here, we will never be silenced Not long ago maternity leave was measured in weeks and not months, we have achieved this change. We have challenged the government on zero hours contracts and 15 minutes home care visits to the elderly, what can be achieved in 15 minutes?

There will never be true equality in the workplace until we have an equal society. We still have so many battles to fight. It's not easy, it never has been and it will not get easier. We are not heard until we raise our voices. This requires passion. Activists have fought long and hard to make things happen, we understand that the humble worker is a human being who matters just as much as the boss. Dave assured us that our fight is his fight.

Dave concluded by saying the next four years are not going to be easy, it will test us all, it will test our resolve and test our nerve. Members are looking to us for leadership. This is the time to stand and be bold, we need to raise our hearts and flags. The road to the future is a long one and Dave has pledged to walk every step with us.

The conference then moved back to the debate of motions. The next motion covered maternity discrimination. The conference noted that key research published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in July, regarding maternity related discrimination and disadvantaged highlighted ongoing problems for pregnant women in the workplace, for the women surveyed:

- One in nine mothers are dismissed or made compulsorily redundant whilst others are not
- One in five mothers experience harassment related to pregnancy or flexible working
- 10% of mothers were discouraged from attending ante natal appointments by their employers
- One in three felt unsupported by their employer at some point while pregnant or returning to work
- Nearly three in 10 said they were not allowed the flexibility they had requested during pregnancy in term hours, 29%, start times 24%, or additional breaks 28%.

Conference was asked to continue the rights of women whilst pregnant and on their return to work, work with NEC and continue UNISON's campaign to end employment tribunal fees in the interest of all women members. Work with the NEC to enable women members with potential pregnancy related discrimination cases to achieve easier and speedier access to advice and support.

The next motion to conference was the right of working age disabled women. Disabled women should be supported and enabled to get or maintain gainful employment and career progression. The numerous layers that impact disabled women when attempting to get or maintain gainful employment, these include:

- Caring responsibilities
- Accessible support to manage their disability(ies)
- Financial constraints (zero hours contracts, gender inequality relating to pay and having to work longer hours and multiple jobs)
- Increased propensity to experience mental ill-health due to disability
- Workplace sickness regimes - disproportionately affecting disabled women

Conference was asked to promote full compliance by employers with the Public Sector Equality Duty particularly in relation to reasonable adjustments for disabled

women workers. Work with national employer bodies to urge them to promote the employment of disabled women, raise the awareness of Access to Work available for women with mental health impairments. Work together to produce and publicise guidance to support disabled women in the workplace regarding access to training, career-progression and reasonable adjustments.

Conference believes that it is a human right for everyone to have access to a safe, secure and affordable home. The Tory government seem to believe that all young people should live with their parents until they go to university or before getting a job and moving their own home. This Tory utopia could not be further from the truth for many of our young women whose lives can be challenging and chaotic. Conference condemns the Tory government's budget decision to abolish housing benefit for young people between the ages of 18 and 21 as it will put vulnerable women. Young women may be escaping abuse at home, be thrown out by their family home, be care leavers or migrants. The bedroom tax has made it impossible for families to maintain a spare room. The reduction in the supply of affordable housing alongside the rising cost of rent and stagnant wages will force young women into homelessness.

Conference notes that homelessness is dangerous for all people but it believes it impacts disproportionately on young women as women are more likely to be at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. Young women may be force into mixed sex shared accommodation, not just shared communal areas but in some cases shared rooms. There is also evidence of men advertising for 'desperate young girls' in need of accommodation, offering them a bed in return for sex. Conference was asked to condemn the vile Tory policy as an attack on the safety and independence of our young women, work with UNISON's Labour Link and Young Members to enable young women's voices to be heard when lobbying and campaigning against this policy, promote and support the work of UNISON's There for You as the role of the branch welfare officer in supporting members through these difficult times and work with UNISON's young women to look at putting campaigning materials together.

Cervical cancer remains the most common cancer in women under the age of 35 and yet cervical cancer screening can prevent up to 80% of cases of the disease. Up to 3000 women are diagnosed per year, 1000 women die each year despite screening, the biggest risk is non attendance of the screening programme. In 2009 the National Cancer Intelligence Network (CNIN) report suggested that there is a higher rate of cervical cancer in Black and Asian women females compared with White females. Conference is asked to work with the relevant organisations and National Black members to promote materials highlighting the symptoms of cervical cancer and instances among Black women. Include information of cervical cancer in the women's health pack, and work with service groups on seeking to influence Clinical Commissioning Groups to raise awareness and encourage more Black women to attend screening.

Conferences recognises that the use of progressive, interactive and widespread social media sites can be very beneficial both in a work and personal context, but are women members fully aware of the risks of posting, for example, where they work, live and or that they are on holiday. There has also been an increase in social media references within disciplinaries in the workplace. It is also known that employers look at profiles on social media at the point of appointing to a post. Social media sites do not emphasise the risks post to women when updating their profiles and that individuals could put themselves at risk without knowing or considering it.

Conference was asked to create an online safety guide for women to be used in regional groups and branches highlighting do's and don'ts for women around the use of social medial sites, to campaign for social media sites to be more aware of the issue of cyber stalking, encourage activists to negotiate robust and effective social media policy within the workplace, and to promote education provision for women members around their own safety online.

Conference noted t that many women worker do not wish to dress in accordance with gendered stereotypes of what is 'appropriate women's dress'. Yes some employers continue to have dress codes with a number of gender specific requirements. Employers should only have dress codes that serve a legitimate purpose, such as maintaining a desired image with customers and clients or aiding staff visibility, and this can be attained without gender specific dress requirements. While all workers are affected by these policies, some women and many non-binary workers find it difficult or impossible to follow a gendered dress code and be true to their own identity. For a trans woman who is at the beginning of, or are considering social gender, the anxiety which often occurs around expressing their gender in a new way in the workplace is compounded by a fear of being disciplined by management. Conference is asked to work with the National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) committee and other bodies in the union as appropriate to produce a best practice guide for branches on gender-neutral dress and uniform policy.

The recent decision of Amnesty International (AI) to work toward a full decriminalisation of the sex trade has disappointed women's groups across the world. As the world's most prominent human rights organisation we would not expect AI to priorities the rights of pimps, and punters over the rights of women and girls and some men to be free from a life of selling sex. There was challenge to the claims regarding AI. There was a lot of debate on this issue both for and against the motion. Germany and New Zealand have fully decriminalised or legalised prostitution activity have seen an increase in trafficking, organised crime and inflation of both the legal and illegal trade with no tangible evidence that women are safer.

In 2015 UNISON NDC carried motion 85 on resetting the equality agenda. It is believed that equality rights and human rights are intrinsically linked. On all public policy matters such as health, education, housing and welfare system we need to highlight the challenge discrimination against women and the impact on their human

rights. Major research should be undertaken on the current levels of gender discrimination being experienced by women and UNISON members in particular at home, at work and in wider society.

Women across the UK are massively underrepresented in the political and decision making processes that influence our lives, especially working class women.

Conference is asked to note that women make up

- 29% of MP's in the UK central government
- 40% of the Welsh assembly members
- 35% of Scottish parliament members
- 19% of Northern Ireland assembly members
- 25% of the house of Lords
- 32% of local authority councillors
- 32% of cabinet posts
- 13% of elected mayors
- 17% of council leaders
- 1 in 7 of elected police and crime commissioners are women
- 32% of UK MEPs

Whilst the general election in 2015 made some gains for women, these figures remain woefully inadequate in ensuring women's voices are heard at all levels within our political landscape. Conference believes that the current devolution agenda will impact heavily on women's equality as local politics remain heavily dominated by older white men. In May 2015 three quarters of local authority councillors were male, 96% white and had an average age of 58, with a quarter over the age of 65. Local authorities have a huge amount of power and provide many of the services women rely on. This is of huge importance when considering the ongoing cuts to local government spending has a hugely disproportionate impact on women undermining access to key services such as childcare, social care and special services for victims of violence against women. The NWC is called upon to work with Labour Link and regions to provide women only training on Women and Politics to encourage and support UNISON women to participate in the political processes and to stand for election at all levels of the political spectrum, to continue to support the 50:50 parliamentary campaign and cabinet structure within local and national government. To lobby for an end to 'all make platforms' and work regionally to promote the voices of women as stakeholders in shaping the future of local as well as national democracy considering the model adopted in Wales of the Women Making a Difference project which promotes leadership for women in all levels of government.

I attended the LGBT caucus meeting where issues discussed include the emergency motion on the tampon tax, the timing of the caucus meeting, it was suggested that LGBT identifying people wear a rainbow lanyard so that they can identify other LGBT

members at conference. There was only one member of the LGBT committee at NWC this year due to personal circumstances at short notice. We were informed that the LGBT conference will take place this year on 19 - 20 November in Llandudno. It was asked if retired members could attend the conference, it was confirmed that they can but they cannot submit motions. The dates for the LGBT network days have yet to be confirmed. Residential care for LGBT people with dementia was discussed with a conclusion that we need to have residential homes that respect the orientation of others and we need to work with members working in residential care.

Session 4

The last session of the conference began by looking at access to justice for women. Concern was noted that the impact of successive government policies is having on women's access to justice. For women who experience domestic violence this means:

- receiving a timely, safe and understanding response to domestic violence from the police
- ensuring that civil remedies, such as injunctions, are used appropriately and are offered alongside other safety measures
- a court system that understands the needs of survivors of domestic violence and takes these crimes seriously
- having access to a criminal justice system with legislative measures that fully recognise the damaging and dangerous nature of domestic violence and prioritises the needs of victims - the vast majority of whom are women

Cuts to public services, police and probation service mean that these measures are not in place. The changes to the Legal Aid system that came into effect in 2013 meant that legal aid was no longer available for the majority of family law cases. These changes have had a devastating effect for women seeking access to justice:

- 50% of women do not have any of the prescribed forms of evidence in order to apply for legal aid in family law cases
- 60% of women take no further action if they are not eligible for legal aid
- Over 30% of women report finding it very difficult to find a Legal Aid solicitor

The introduction of tribunal fees in the workplace has led to a significant decline in the number of claims - most markedly in the number of sex discrimination claims which fell by 83% in the year following the introduction of tribunal fees. The latest attack on women's access to justice is the introduction in April 2025 of the 'criminal court charge' which will be imposed on top of fines, prosecution cost and other charges. The charge is increased if the case is heard at trial - encouraging women to plead guilty to keep costs down. Conference is reminded that abuse, marginalisation and poverty are at the root of much of women's offending and that traditionally that

women are sentenced more harshly than men for similar offences. The key to preventing re-offending is access to effective support services. The cuts and punitive measures are a despicable attack on the most vulnerable in society, and a direct of women's access to justice.

The last speaker of the conference was Adwoa Kwateng-Kluyitse from Forward. There is an excellent summary of Adwoa's speech on the unison website and can be found at <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/article/2016/02/lets-focus-on-how-we-can-protect-girls-from-female-genital-mutilation/> . I would urge you to take a look at this article. NHS staff are affected by legislation regarding when cases should be reported. We need to have awareness of this in order to advise members who request advice or support.

There is a growing concern regarding the funding crisis within services that support women who have experienced rape and sexual violence. There is a massive increase in the demand for services. With the Goddard enquiry, which will look into historical cases of childhood sexual abuse, the number of cases is expected to increase in the coming years. Pernicious austerity measures that are causing in reduction in funding to vital services should not be allowed to endanger women further.

Unison has a strong track record of support to Rape Crisis Centres. The NWC is asked to work with all relevant sections within UNISON including Labour link to encourage regional and branch women's groups to raise awareness of this funding crisis that rape crisis centres are facing, campaign for central government for rape crisis specialist services, identify their local rape crisis service and considering forging links to better support them in their fight for funding, and report back to NWC's conference in 2017 with progress and success.

The refugees from Syria's civil war, which is in its fifth year, has killed around 250k people, forced 3.98 million to flee the country, and internally displaced around 7.6 million. The prospect of a better life in Europe has driven many to make the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean. Thousands have died en route. Save the Children have warned 'unaccompanied children are at the greatest risk from people traffickers, some being forced into manual labour, domestic work, drug smuggling and prostitution.' There are up to 27 million people living in conditions of slavery, in forced labour or sexual exploitation around the globe today. Every 30 seconds a child is trafficked. Women and girls make up 98% of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. All sex trafficking violates basic human rights including the right to bodily integrity, equality, dignity, health, security and freedom from violence and torture. NWC are asked to consider how to support the International World Day against trafficking in human persons on 30 July, forge closer links with UNISON's international department in order to improve engagement with international campaigns and solidarity initiatives and to help raise of the key issues in those countries identified as priority in UNISON, encourage regions and branches to

affiliate to those organisations that are a priority for UNISON, and continue to work with those organisations that cross borders in their quest to eliminate violence against women.

The government's immigration policy is a draconian piece of legislation designed to criminalise and stigmatise immigrants and undocumented people. It is part of a wider ongoing government attempt to appear tough on immigration to an increasingly sceptical public. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reports that women and girls comprise about half of any refugee, internally displaced or stateless population. Women are at greater risk of harm, due to traditional gender roles and women's position in society, including the risk of sexual or gender-based violence. Unaccompanied women and girls, women head of households, and pregnant disabled or older women face particular challenges. There are proposals to restrict access to the NHS for migrant workers in the process of being implemented. This creates huge potential for discrimination against the UK's Black communities, and particularly women who may already struggle to access care because of cultural and language barriers. NWC are asked to strengthen or work advocating for evidence based, human rights centred policies around migration, which take account of specific of women migrants and refugees, continue to challenge racist immigration policies and to support a wide range of anti-racist organisations at local and national level, and lobby the UK government to use their influences to ensure that where refugee camps are in place, the safety and dignity of women is assured.

Conference welcomes UNISON's policy on the 'Right to Choose'. Pregnant women have the right to obtain treatment and advice in confidence free from harassment and intimidation. There is concern about such groups as 'Abort 67' who in recent years target has targeted abortion clinics with the intention to harass and intimidate women who are exercising their legal right to terminate a pregnancy. The harassment is also aimed at clinic staff forcing the closure of clinics and staff having their personal safety threatened. NWC is asked to support the 'Back Off' campaign, to lobby MPs on a statutory 'buffer zone' for all pickets outside clinics, develop a strategy and campaign on these clinics, to support and show solidarity to staff working in this essential area. This motion was defeated by conference.

The last motion of the conference was about increasing the number of young women who attend NWC. The discussion centred around how we need to develop our young members and show them how they can benefit of the experiences of their sisters. Young people can find role models at conference. The emphasis is on meeting young people where they are, and introducing them to UNISON and what the union can do for them. We should encourage young people to attend the Young Members Weekend and join the Youth Committee. The national young people's weekend is 13 - 15 May. We need to be mindful of young members who are fighting to save student bursaries. The conference whole heartedly agreed that we need to look after and encourage our young member.

This was my first women's conference, and with the permission of branch, it won't be my last. The conference was a wakeup call for me. I met a lot of sisters who each have their own story to tell, some of them shared their stories from the rostrum, I could not help but be touch by their bravery and that they felt safe and comfortable to share some of their deepest fears and experiences.

I would urge every woman in UNISON to attend women's conference at least once. It is an experience not to be missed. It will have impact on your life and will definitely challenge your thinking. You will come back inspired and invigorated, ready to face the difficult times ahead.

If you would like to know more about the National Women's Conference please get in touch with Viv Thompson or me.

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