

Written evidence submitted by Labour Women's Network (MRS0051)

Who we are

Labour Women's Network (LWN) was founded thirty two years ago, to secure women's equality in the Labour Party. We are a membership organisation affiliated to the Labour Party as a socialist society. We train and empower women to change the culture of their local parties, stand for public office and be ready to lead. We fight sexism and discrimination, and campaign for necessary changes in Labour's policy, practice and culture. We believe in sisterhood no matter your shade of red, and aim to bring diverse Labour women together to make our voice heard.

The Covid-19 Crisis and Women's Participation in Public life

The current crisis will influence women in their full diversity in innumerate ways, some foreseeable and others less so, and we welcome the Women and Equalities Select Committee acknowledging and investigating this, alongside the impact on those with other protected characteristics. LWN will focus on its impact on their role within democratic purposes:

- 1) Women's visibility in the national leadership team responding to the Coronavirus crisis is very poor. In particular, the Prime Minister set up a top team to meet daily (compromising the PM, Chancellor Rishi Sunak, Health Secretary Matt Hancock, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster Michael Gove, and First Secretary of State Dominic Raab) which is 100% male. This is disappointing on two fronts: firstly, that these roles, in addition to the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer- are all held by men in 2020, and secondly, that the government did not see the need to diversify the pool of people in this top team, to broaden methods of decision making and styles of communication, or two signal to the country that women are equally important in the response to this crisis. The name chosen to denote the group- 'the C-19'- felt to one LWN member "like that of a school yard gang", and carries unhelpful connotations of gendered bravado. The establishment of a gender balanced team of specialists and decision makers could improve governance, enhance engagement, and increase people confidence. The contrast of the UK and USA's responses to the virus versus that of New Zealand and Germany may even reveal early indications that increased influence of women leaders might improve medical and economic outcomes. This should be subject to analysis when appropriate in future.
- 2) The adverse economic impact of Cororavirus on women may reduce their ability to further themselves in politics. We already know that financial barriers present a disproportionate challenge to, and deterrent from, women's equal participation in democratic processes. For example, women's membership of political organisations (including Labour Women's Network, and likely, political parties) has taken a noticeable drop since the beginning of the UK's Coivd-19 crisis as household incomes rapidly contract. Women's ability to attend training, conferences and events after

lockdown eases may be impacted, potentially having a knock on effect on women's networks and opportunities.

- 3) Women are more likely to have caring responsibilities than men, whether in relation to children, vulnerably adults or older relatives, and may therefore disproportionately find themselves less able or unable to continue contributing in the workplace or in political activity during this period. Women's wellbeing and mental health may also be impacted disproportionately, in part due to the added pressures of being more likely to be primary carers. Conversely, for some, this time presents an opportunity for men to increase the amount of time spent caring (for children, vulnerable adults or older relatives). This could play an important contribution to redressing the inequalities which limit women's future economic potential, and arguably should be encouraged.
- 4) The necessary delay of the planned 2020 elections means potential gains for women's representation, for example, as Metro Mayors or Police and Crime Commissioner is set back. Currently only 18% of Police and Crime Commissioners are women, and 0% of Metro Mayors. Women candidates for both of these elections, and for local council seats, may be less able than their male counterparts to extend their campaigns and candidacy by another year due to the disproportionate pressures on women's time and resources. We know that historically, longer campaign periods both deter women from coming forward and increase the attrition rate of women candidates.
- 5) There are many positive examples of women leading the policy and community response to Covid-19, which should be noted and celebrated. Examples of LWN training graduates contributing in this way include: Olga Fitzroy, who launched a petition to ensure self-employed women who have taken maternity leave in last three years are not penalised for this in income support package; Nicky Brennan, who created Brum Baby Bank, distributing infant essentials across Birmingham; and Charlie-Louise Akintolo has formed a free legal and financial advice helpline for people whose businesses or employment are affected by Covid-19. Community by community, women councillors are leading local mutual support groups, staffing anti-isolation phone lines, and delivering food and medicines to those in need. There is also evidence of LWN members networking effectively both socially and professionally, by using new technologies, and leading the way in helping older relatives to access new technologies to aid inclusion and reduce. These are just a few of many fine examples of sisterly resilience – women supporting other women through this challenging time.
- 6) The emergence of new technologies and better ways of working remotely through the lockdown period should be harnessed long-term, to make presenteeism less of a factor in political activism and workplaces alike. This would benefit many women, including those with caring responsibilities, disabilities, and in rural areas. Coronavirus has forced an attitudinal change in many professional cultures, from “it can't be done differently” to “how do we make this work”. Long may this shift continue, enabling women's value to be assessed by the outcomes to which they

contribute, rather than their physical presence at meetings or desks. The re-evaluation of what constitutes “key work” also presents an opportunity to address some of the core biases against the value of work predominantly done by women which contribute towards the gender pay gap.

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