

Consultation submission from Labour Women's Declaration

**The rôle of the GEO: embedding equalities across Government**

Labour Women's Declaration working group submits this response on behalf of our over-6,000 signatories, focussing on our particular concerns regarding women's sex-based rights, economic situation, health, opportunities and support. We have taken the five parameters of the terms of reference and addressed each in turn.

*1. The structure and function of the GEO and its location in the Cabinet Office: how effectively does this enable it to support cross-departmental work on equalities, including the collection and analysis of equalities data?*

From its inception under Labour in October 2007 until the change of government to the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition in May 2010, the GEO was an independent department. Since then, the GEO has been in the Home Office, DCMS, DfE and DfID. The [May 2018 enquiry](#) conducted by WESC pointed up the difficulties of this arrangement, made even more complicated by the junior ministers (for women and for equalities) being in different departments. The shift to the Cabinet Office made sense, in that this is a 'cross-departmental' arena. However, the lack of civil servants who are skilled and experienced in this particular field, and who may at any moment be expected to work on something quite different, merely reinforces the need for the Government Equalities Office to be independent with its own dedicated staff.

The concern that the GEO is too small to justify this is surely counteracted by Liz Truss's intention to include socio-economic status and geographic inequalities in the remit. The Equality Act public sector duty regarding socio-economic inequalities were never implemented; the Coalition government explicitly decided not to take them forward. The intention to now include socio-economic status and geographic inequalities in some way will add considerably to the work of the GEO; it will be in need of a skilled and dedicated staff to progress these ideas and liaise with all other departments..

Shortly before the 2010 election, David Cameron referred to lobby groups as "the next big scandal waiting to happen." While the right of citizens to lobby is crucial to a functioning democracy, the power of large, well-funded and pervasive lobby groups is a threat to democracy. It is worrying that the Cabinet Office is signed up to one of the most influential lobby groups of modern times, Stonewall. By participating in the Stonewall Diversity Champions scheme, the Cabinet Office cannot discharge its duties effectively, since aspects of the scheme run directly counter to the legal provisions of the Equality Act, and indeed, Stonewall has actively lobbied for the removal of the sex-based rights enshrined in the Act. This also interferes with the effective collection of data – the conflation of sex and gender means that good data concerning sex may be missing. Compliance with Stonewall's requirements is counter to the intentions of the Equality Act and the stated aims of the GEO. See Naomi Cunningham's [recent paper](#) for Legal Feminist. For the GEO to have the necessary independence, it cannot remain with the Cabinet Office.

*2. The GEO's role in supporting compliance with international obligations including the UN Conventions and Sustainable Development Goals.*

It is clearly crucial that the GEO is able to advise DfID and all departments concerned with international relations and issues about their obligations under CEDAW, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals etc. It is also important that the clear goals and the intentions of these international agreements are not seen as applying only elsewhere and not in the UK. For example, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals cover the need for separate toilets for women and girls explicitly at 6.2, and yet this is currently being eroded in the UK in favour of so-called 'gender neutral' provision.

It has been established that the education of girls is one of the most effective interventions that can be made in [securing international sustainability goals](#) including in the area of climate change. A GEO with expertise in equality for women and girls would be well placed to make a more effective contribution in this arena, covering such issues as the use of sustainable and non-harmful fuels for cooking, or the provision of water and toileting facilities in some poor communities. Work in these areas benefit from understandings of the different roles women play in such communities. The goals of sustainability and equality for women can be deeply linked and need to be a considered part of international sustainability work.

The GEO can work effectively across the UK's international obligations so long as it has a large and well-informed team with the skills and understanding to ensure full compliance with all international obligations, including within the UK.

*3. The role of Minister for Women and Equalities: what does it mean for this to be a dual-departmental role? How robustly does it champion equalities across Government?*

It is of course essential that the Minister with this portfolio has a seat in Cabinet, at the 'top table' and it appears that one of the reasons for making Women and Equalities a second string to a regular Cabinet post is to ensure that these issues are properly considered. However, this would immediately indicate a failure to take this aspect of government work sufficiently seriously.

Each of the holders of this posts since 2010 has had another rôle, which has been seen as their primary rôle, giving them a Cabinet place. There have been advantages claimed for this, in that the specific area which the Minister is covering gets full attention to its equalities obligations, but this suggests that other areas, perhaps in more need of such attention, are neglected. The 2018 [inquiry paper](#) entitled "The role of Minister for Women and Equalities and the place of GEO in government" discusses this fully.

That paper saw the task of Minister for Women and Equalities as a necessarily part-time job. The intended addition of the new areas of socio-economic and geographic inequalities are likely to make it a very full-time one.

## Written evidence submitted by Nordic Model Now! [GEO0010]

Women are over-represented in all indicators of poverty and it is clear that this is worsening with the impact first of Brexit (see, for example, the [Women's Budget Group analysis](#) of what the deal means for women) and then of Covid, recognised to have had a much more serious economic impact on women than on men. The government's recovery programme must by its nature be cross-departmental and needs a well-informed Equalities Office to advise and support all branches of Government. See further detail and references in Section 4.

The Government could indicate its commitment to the broad range of issues for women (including lesbians, who have their own particular concerns) and other groups across all equalities issues by making this a freestanding post within its own department with its own dedicated civil servants, and the post-holder having a Cabinet seat. with expertise and commitment. This is unlikely to be achieved without a dedicated long-term team.

### *4. The GEO's role in highlighting the numerous equalities issues which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.*

Liz Truss's 16 December 2020 speech raised the issues of geographic and socio-economic inequalities, which are among the equalities issues clearly seen as a consequence of the pandemic. Geographic inequalities cover socio-economic, health and educational inequalities. Given how key socio-economic issues are to the problems that have been highlighted by the pandemic, it is perhaps surprising that a [statement from the GEO](#) on 25 January 2021 pushed aside the possibility of enacting the socio-economic duty contained in the Equality Act: "The policy objectives of the socio-economic duty do not align with the government's agenda for greater social mobility, and there are no plans to implement the socio-economic duty for English and cross-border bodies."

The problem of low-paid care workers was clear only two months into lockdown, with women bearing the brunt of the economic and social impact, as reported in the [Guardian on 29 May 2020](#). Even at this early point, it was observed that only one in 10 lower earners are able to work from home, and that 69% of low earners are women. The inadequate funding of childcare providers was already sounding alarm bells, with many expected to go out of business, leading to women (97% of that workforce) losing jobs and others unable to continue work without the availability of childcare. The massive increase of violence against women under lockdown conditions was only too obvious, just nine weeks in.

By September, the UN was also [expressing concern](#) about the international situation for women, with many of the issues being pointed up having obvious relevance to the UK. Now, in February 2021, the Women's Budget Group (WBG) has collated evidence concerning many [serious issues of inequality](#) being exacerbated by the pandemic. Low income families have been considerably more affected by a loss of hours of work than those with higher incomes; many more Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic parents have lost work hours than their white counterparts. Mothers, they show, have had to undertake more housework, shopping, childcare, schoolwork supervision, and care for other adults, than fathers. All parts of the UK showed similar patterns.

## Written evidence submitted by Nordic Model Now! [GEO0010]

The WBG's report, '[Where Women Stand at the Start of 2021](#)' paints a very concerning picture of the range of impacts (see link for further links to pdfs of both the full report and the executive summary). The report makes a range of recommendations across many different arenas. Concerning care work – one of the professions now so obviously essential – it recommends fundamental reform of the system with the real living wage as the minimum for pay across the sector. Full details of [their recommendations](#) can be downloaded.

The Women and Equalities Committee has, on 9 February, published a paper on the impacts on women of the pandemic and the government's actions to manage it. "[Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact](#)" is clear about the failings of government policy in relation to women. This paper points up all the various issues we would wish to raise, including the need for sex-disaggregated statistics in order to undertake proper equality impact assessments. We particularly emphasise their recommendation 28 (although we point out that gender has been conflated with sex, sex being what is meant): "We believe the GEO must take a more proactive role in mainstreaming gender equality in policy development across all Government departments. We urge the GEO and the Minister for Women and Equalities to be much more ambitious in coordinating equalities strategies and holding departments to account on equalities. The GEO's strategy plan for 2020–2021 must reflect these proactive policy development priorities and demonstrate clear key performance indicators for achieving them."

An independent GEO, with expertise in all the equalities areas, a civil service with ever-developing understandings, and partnership with interested parties outside government (as has been successful in the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy) could make a serious difference in the post-pandemic world.

*5. The inquiry will also consider the new approaches and initiatives which Minister for Women and Equalities Liz Truss announced in her speech on fighting for fairness at the Centre for Policy Studies on Dec 16 2020, including the implications of the GEO taking on sponsorship of the Social Mobility Commission.*

We have referred to several aspects of this speech in the previous sections of this submission. We raise here a few points not otherwise mentioned.

The idea that, if women opened businesses at the same rate as men, we could add £250bn to the economy, entirely ignores women's enormous unpaid contribution to the economy. If women opened businesses, who would do all the work they are currently doing? This idea appears to show little understanding of the reality of women's lives.

The repeated statements in Liz Truss's speech concerning 'the scourge of geographic inequality' do not define what she is referring to beyond comments about the south-east and elsewhere. It is important that geographic inequality is understood to concern more than a north-south issue; it also must include consideration of the differences between metropolitan,

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urban and rural. Rural is often believed to mean the area just beyond an urban area. The reality is often very different, with geographically large but very sparsely populated areas receiving the same per capita allocations for e.g. social services with no recognition of the greatly increased costs of travel, the need for more than one centre etc. Women in such rural areas may be highly disadvantaged, with a lack of public transport and the need to transport children to school (often not provided for those obliged to travel considerable distances for 16-18 education) and chosen activities, a lack of available childcare etc. Note CEDAW article 14.

We have welcomed Liz Truss's commitment to women's sex-based rights and single-sex spaces. This approach, avoiding the gender identity ideology that seems to impact so much else, is very much what we are working for. However, on its own, it is not going to help redress the enormous health and education inequalities faced by women, the failure to use equality impact assessments effectively in the development of policy, and the fact that the poorest 10% of women have lost so much ground in the last 10 years, that they are getting sicker, and dying younger and poorer than anyone else, as reported in [The Marmot Review 10 Years On](#) from the Institute of Health Equity.

Everything in Liz Truss's speech must be considered in the light of the Women and Equalities Committee report, and we again commend its conclusions and recommendations.

### **CONCLUSION**

As has been outlined here, we are firmly of the opinion that the lead rôle in the Government Equalities Office needs to be a full Secretary of State rather than a Minister, to work in a standalone department with a dedicated civil service staff with wide-ranging knowledge and understanding. Only then can its work be nimble enough to address all the issues both long-term and immediate, national and international, involving women and all the other protected characteristics of the Equality Act alongside an understanding of socio-economic and geographic inequalities.

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