

About LWN

Labour Women's Network was founded 33 years ago. We train Labour women to change the culture of their local parties, stand for public office and be ready to lead. We fight sexism, and campaign for necessary changes in Labour's policy, practice and culture, bringing diverse Labour women together to make our voice heard. A membership organisation, we have around two thousand full members, a network of around five thousand supporters, and over twelve thousand Twitter followers (@labourwomensnet).

Our primary work is our gold standard training programmes. Through the LWN Political School and the Jo Cox Women in Leadership Scheme, we train over 250 women a year in both political strategy and personal development, including our popular How To Stand For Parliament course. LWN training works. At the 2019 General Election, of the record breaking 53% of Labour candidates who were women, 20% were graduates of Labour Women's Network. As we move forward to the 6th May elections, LWN is proud that over half of Labour's women Police and Crime Commissioner candidates, and both of Labour's women Metro Mayoral candidates, are graduates of one of LWN training courses. This is much needed as there are currently no women Metro Mayors in the UK, and only 1 in 10 Police and Crime Commissioners are women. Around half of current women Labour MPs were trained by LWN, including Shadow Chancellor Anneliese Dodds, Deputy Leader Angela Rayner, Shadow Duchy of Lancaster Rachel Reeves, Shadow Secretary of State for International Trade Emily Thornberry MP, and Shadow International Development Secretary Preet Kaur Gill MP.

Our campaigns include championing positive action, fighting the scourge of all male panels, calling for Labour to introduce an independent process for sexual harassment complaints, and securing parental leave policies for councillors and MPs. As the only women's affiliate to the Labour Party, we pride ourselves on being the "Women in the room" at the heart of the Party, but we are a proudly independent voice, and receive no central funding from Labour. All our income comes from membership and fundraising.

A proudly diverse team, our Chair, Abena Opong Asare MP, is our first black Chair, and our Committee is currently 50% BAME too, with representation from leading Labour women across the country, and proud organisational record on access for LGBT+ women, women with disabilities, women who are the first in their family to access higher education, and women with caring responsibilities. Our training graduates' ages range from eighteen to seventy and include train drivers, teachers, scientists, carers, sound engineers, nurses, doctors and firefighters.

You can find out more about our work at www.lwn.org.uk

Virtual access

The Covid-19 pandemic has finally dragged Parliament's ways of working to the present. Remote voting, combined with the ability to ask questions and make speeches via digital screens into the chamber have been a revolution for current MPs, and doubtless changed the perception of parliament for potential future MPs for the better. Virtual access has dramatically reduced difficulties presented by parliamentary hours and childcare responsibilities, a disproportionate challenge for women. One MP told us *"The ability to have tea with my kids most nights, whilst still having my vote counted in Parliament, has markedly enhance their wellbeing. They are handed from pillar to post much less, and I finally feel like I have found equilibrium between my responsibilities as a productive MP and as a parent."* Virtual working has also been ground-breaking for those with disabilities, illnesses or

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mental health considerations, about which shielding MP Vicky Foxcroft has spoken articulately. One female MP told LWN that virtual parliament was helpful during days of serious menstrual cramps, because unlike when waiting hours to speak in a debate in the chamber, they could sit comfortably with a heat pad whilst waiting to make their contribution. Geographical barriers have also been obliterated; an MP can now juxtapose Westminster and constituency meetings throughout the day, for example attending a virtual school assembly at 9am, a select committee at 10am, a lunchtime roundtable with local campaigners at 12, etc, bringing a welcome end to the need to issue a blanket decline to all constituency invitations from Mondays to Thursdays.

The fact that parliamentary authorities have on a number of occasions threatened to withdraw hybrid access, despite having invested in the technology to enable it, is regressive, potentially discriminatory, and demonstrates a disappointing failure of leadership, when employers in many sectors across the country are looking to do work differently long-term. This not only makes life harder for many women and disabled MPs, but also sends a harmful message that UK politics is not inclusive to all, and signals to the economy at large that we should race back to the problematic past rather than look forward to a more flexible, productive and lower carbon future. The imperative to open up our democracy by maintaining virtual access to Party meetings indefinitely is something LWN's members feel strongly about. In excess of 400 people have signed our campaign letter to the Labour Party arguing to "Keep the good stuff" from lockdown and embed online access to political business as an integral part of future functionality (see more here: <https://www.lwn.org.uk/keepthegoodstuff>). 120 people registered to attend our event on Keep The Good Stuff, featuring Chi Onwurah MP, Shadow Minister for Science, Research & Digital; Dawn Butler MP, MP for Brent Central; Sam Smethers, then CEO Fawcett Society; Sian Elliot, TUC Women's Policy Officer; Alexandra Topping, Gender & Equality Senior Reporter, The Guardian; Cllr Sharon Thompson, Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods at Birmingham City Council; and Kate Dearden, Head of Research and Policy, Community Union and LWN Committee.

LWN itself has seen the benefits of virtual working during the pandemic, with well over a thousand members across the country participating in our online events, the majority of whom had never attended a physical event. Our virtual training programmes are heavily over-subscribed, with demand notably exceeding that for most "in room" courses. One candidate from our *LWN Political School: Making Your Mark* course indicated that she would never have felt able to attend face to face, because a combination of financial, logistical and wellbeing factors. This is widening access to politics in action. LWN has therefore committed to walk the talk and do a minimum of fifty percent of our business virtually, permanently. For us as an organisation this promises reduced venue and travel costs, a lower carbon footprint, and increased staff and volunteer retention. For our members it is transformative. Attendees at our recent event featuring first woman Shadow Chancellor Anneliese Dodds in conversation with Sunday Times journalist Hannah Al-Othman, attendees zoomed in from Cornwall to Scotland. This would be simply impossible if we had held the same meeting in parliament on a weekday evening as in days gone by. LWN urges Parliament to walk the talk too and commit to hybrid access to both Houses indefinitely, because it is the right thing to do.

Parental leave

LWN has for several years been campaigning for formal paid parental leave arrangements for councillors and MPs. Juggling public life and new family members has been challenging for decades. Politicians including many LWN members report doing casework in the labour ward, chairing meetings whilst breastfeeding, and leaving crying babies with colleagues to pass through the voting lobbies. Some progress has now been achieved: babes in arms have graced the voting lobbies and indeed the chamber with no reported ill effects. More significantly still, proxy voting for parental leave immediately after the birth or adoption of a new family member has been trialled and now legalised going forward. However, this only applies to votes not to other aspects of the role. Stella

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Creasy MP has challenged this, as the first MP to appoint a formal proxy for constituency work during her maternity leave. The recent Maternity Allowances Bill, which was given Royal Assent on 1st March 2021, was a missed opportunity, applying parental leave rights only to government ministers, creating a two tier system in which some MPs have more rights than others, including the guarantee of return to the same role after parental leave. The Bill was also flawed in other ways, only currently making provision for maternity leave for birth mothers, not paternity leave, adoption leave or shared parental leave. It is extraordinary that these issues have still not been resolved in 2021.

LWN has worked with the Local Government Associate to draft, publish and encourage the uptake of a legally watertight parental leave policy for councillors, which can be found here:

<https://www.local.gov.uk/lga-labour/our-work/parental-leave-policy-councillors> Much of it would also work for MPs. LWN believes adequate parental leave arrangements combined with permanent adoption of hybrid virtual parliament options would increase the wellbeing of MPs and their families, improve the retention of women MPs, and widen access to politics.

Premises

There are still more men's toilets than women's in Parliament, in 2021. There are still too few sanitary product disposal machines. One LWN member who works for an MP told us *"I get worried about being asked why I'm on the fifth floor of Portcullis House when I work on the second floor alongside others from my party, because you can't buy an emergency tampon on the second floor. It's inconvenient and embarrassing."* Parliamentary shops stock extensive decorative gifts, but few useful essentials. It takes around three times as long to navigate the length of the estate using a wheelchair or with infants in a pushchair than it does on foot, and some parts of the estate remain inaccessible altogether. The strict rules on audio visual equipment in rooms hireable by charities and businesses mean that many events which could be broadcast virtually to a wider audience to widen participation cannot be. There are innumerable more portraits and statues of men than of women. Male MPs tend to occupy larger, nicer and more accessible offices than women MPs, as these are determined by party whips on the basis of seniority and longevity, a system which favours men.

Culture

Whilst the degrees of independence introduced to the parliamentary complaints system are very welcome, the culture of Parliament remains male dominated, inflexible, and prone to harassment and bullying. Men have more power than women. The recent establishment of the Labour Women's Parliamentary Staff Network and Conservative Women's Parliamentary Staff Network is a very positive step forward to allow women working for MPs to connect, reduce isolation and debate key issues. However, Parliament remains a place where women's safety, voices and agency are undermined, often on a daily basis. Very little leadership has been demonstrated to resolve this, least of all by political parties. Within the Labour Party, including the Parliamentary Labour Party, LWN members report widespread sexism, misogyny, and harassment, and - less widespread but still far too common - assault. Women correctly feel there is little point in coming forward, because no action is likely to be taken, and the risks of leaks, delays and politicisation with the current complaints process leave them wholly lacking in confidence in the system to keep them safe, deliver fair outcomes, or reduce the occurrences. LWN has long called for Labour to introduce an independent process for sexual harassment complaints, from first contact, to final outcome. Whilst improvements have been made, this has not yet materialised, and progress towards it is painfully slow, and characterised by organisational resistance. Given that most political women working in Parliament would be more inclined to deal with harassment issues within their own Party processes rather than via Parliamentary authorities, this presents a serious problem. Recent experiences, including an MP accused of sexual harassment retaining his party whip, combined with the national conversation around women's safety following the tragic killing of Sarah Everard, have increased many women's feelings of frustration around these issues. Political leaders of all parliamentary parties need to join forces with

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parliamentary authorities to form a concerted and strategic effort to change the culture of misogyny and create zero tolerance on sexual harassment.

The perpetual misnaming of black women MPs by both broadcasters and House authorities is also a deeply offensive problem. It speaks to a regressive view of what an MP should look like - note, white male MPs are not misnamed with anything like the frequency - and undermines both the individuals concerned and wider efforts to diversify Parliament.

LWN is extremely proud that the Parliamentary Labour Party is now 51% female. This is down to the use of positive action, and stands in stark contrast to parliamentary parties which have not used this (for example, 24% for Conservatives, 33% for the Scottish Nationalist Party, 13% for the Democratic Unionist Party). These women continue to make an impact on policy, culture and public engagement, both individually and in their critical mass. However, Parliament overall still stands at only 34% women, with underrepresentation of LBT, disabled and ethnic minority women still particular problems. LWN heartily encourages other political parties to fast track their slow progress on women's representation by committing to the use of positive action. Only when Parliament is gender equal is it likely to become "gender sensitive".

March 2021