

# ***Equal Citizens***

## **Proposals to Promote the Equal Treatment of Women**

**Policy Paper 10**



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# Opportunity Denied

*“The Liberal Democrats exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community ... We believe that the role of the state is to enable all citizens to attain their ideals, to contribute fully to their communities, and to take part in the decisions which affect their lives. Upholding these values of individual and social justice, we reject all discrimination based upon race, colour, religion, age, disability, sex or sexual orientation and all forms of entrenched privilege and inequality.”*  
(Preamble to the Party Constitution)

1.0.1 These are the fundamental aims and values of the Liberal Democrats. By promoting equality of opportunity and proposing measures to prevent discrimination, this paper shows their particular relevance to women.

## 1.1 The Starting Point

1.1.1 Women make up over half of the UK’s population, but do not have an equal share of power or an equal opportunity to participate fully in society. They face a wide range of social, political and economic barriers which prevent them from fulfilling their potential.

1.1.2 When women were granted the vote over 75 years ago, many thought that the last great barrier to equality had come down. Since then, women’s access to education and to the workplace has improved and more women have moved into positions of economic or political power. In the past twenty years in particular, since the introduction of equal pay and sex discrimination legislation, the position of women has improved dramatically. There are now more women in paid employment than ever before; the gap between male and female wages has narrowed; women take up around half of all further and higher education places; the percentage of women on public bodies has

increased by nearly 50% in the past eight years and there are more women MPs than at any other time in history. For some women, particularly young, childless women from white, well-educated, middle-income backgrounds equality of opportunity is already a reality.

1.1.3 For others, however, the old injustices and inequalities remain and new problems have arisen, limiting the choice and opportunities for both men and women. It is still the case that a disproportionate number of those living in poverty are women. Women working full time are still on average paid only 79% per hour of what their male counterparts earn. (While childless women under 30 earn 90% of their male counterparts, the figure for those with children is only 63% and just 50% for lone mothers.) A large majority of those earning less than half the national average wage are women, as are the majority of pensioners on income support and 90% of single, custodial parents. The vast majority of those with caring responsibilities are women. Although women constitute 44% of the UK workforce, they comprise only 20% of managers and 2% of senior executives.

1.1.4 The reasons why these disparities remain are numerous. There is a deeply rooted assumption in society that women should have primary responsibility for the obligations associated with families: the care of children and older people, and the maintenance of the home. These responsibilities are usually unpaid and undervalued, and at the same time, prevent women from establishing their own economic independence.

1.1.5 The continuing inflexibility of many employers - in terms of hours and conditions of work - locks many women out of full-time jobs, while the rigidity of the benefits system is often a major disincentive to those seeking part-time work. The cost and unavailability of childcare

excludes many women from the workforce. Even those women who 'make it' face powerful informal networks of men, which often prevent them from getting to the very top of industry or the professions.

1.1.6 These barriers are constantly being reinforced by the cultural messages that children and adults receive from the education system, from the media and from advertising. They are that women are less powerful than men and that their needs and wishes are less important. As a result, many women hold themselves in low self esteem and do not protest against inequality or discrimination.

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***In the past twenty years, the position of women has improved dramatically, but for many the old injustices and inequalities remain***

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1.1.7 These obstacles are damaging to both men and women, reducing choices for both sexes. Women find that their abilities and ambitions are stifled, that they are often excluded from public life and fail to meet their economic or social potential. Those exceptional women who succeed against the odds often have to work harder than their male counterparts, or give up parental aspirations simply to get to a position of equality. Men also sometimes suffer as an indirect result of discrimination against women. For example, men are often excluded from meaningful participation in family life by the demands of their jobs and the expectations of society. Traditional male jobs in the manufacturing sector are being replaced by traditional female jobs in the service sector from which men are often excluded.

1.1.8 As a result of this failure to use to the full the talents of all of its people, Britain is under performing both economically and socially. *It is in the interests of everyone in this country - both men and women - to extend the maximum possible range of choices and opportunities to all individuals, regardless of their gender.*

## 1.2 The Conservative Approach

1.2.1 The Conservative approach is based on a belief in unfettered individualism, and a refusal to recognise that individuals can only function (and therefore only properly be considered) in a social context. The pronouncement by the UK's first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, that "*there is no such thing as society*" exemplifies the limitations of the Conservative approach.

1.2.2 By pretending that individuals exist in isolation, and refusing to address the pervasive discrimination - legal, financial, social and personal - which has prevented women from participating in society on equal terms with men, the Conservatives deny the reality of women's experience. They fail to recognise that both society and government have roles to play in eradicating discrimination and, instead, blame women themselves for their failure to break through the glass ceiling.

1.2.3 The Conservative approach means that women are little better placed today than they were in 1979. In some respects, their position relative to men has worsened: the gap between rich and poor has been widened; the value of child benefit has fallen relative to earnings; child care provision remains among the worst in the EU; nursery education targets have been set and then abandoned; single mothers have been on the receiving end of a rhetorical barrage and now face benefit cuts if they refuse to name the father; the recommendations of the Equal Opportunities Commission have been ignored; and sex discrimination and equal pay legislation remains inadequate.

1.2.4 The Conservatives have done everything they can to prevent the European Union from improving the position of women in Britain. They have blocked EU social legislation protecting the interests of women whenever they have been able, and have failed to introduce supporting legislation in Britain. They have failed to ratify the EC Directive on parental leave and refused to endorse paid paternity leave to the

detriment of both sexes. By opting out of the Social Protocol of the Maastricht Treaty, the Conservatives have rejected the right of women to equal treatment in the workplace.

1.2.5 Therefore, as a direct result of the Conservative approach, women in the UK continue to face direct and indirect discrimination, and inequality of opportunity.

## 1.3 The Labour Approach

1.3.1 If Labour, under Tony Blair, is leaving behind the politics of the class struggle and political correctness then that is to be welcomed. Yet the Party remains deeply conservative with its roots firmly bedded in a male-dominated trade union movement that has done little to advance the cause of women. So far, even the Labour 'modernisers' have failed to demonstrate how any redefinition of Socialism will improve the position of women, be that in their own party or in society at large.

1.3.2 Labour's key policy initiative intended to advance the cause of women is the establishment of a Ministry for Women, yet that proposal is profoundly misguided. The new Ministry is unlikely to be able to hold

anything but a watching brief on its own. There is certainly no historical precedent to suggest that a Ministry with responsibility for promoting the equal treatment of women alone would have sufficient political muscle to take on the Department for Education, let alone the Treasury. Its responsibilities would be too narrow to enable it to exercise real power or influence. Neither is the experience of other separatist structures - such as local authority women's units - encouraging. Rather than such grandiose gestures, the need is to assert the duty of *every* government department to consider the implications of their policies on women and to establish effective mechanisms for monitoring progress towards clear targets.

1.3.3 The Ministry proposal is a poor substitute for policies that might have a real bearing on the position of women. An increasingly timid 'modern' Labour Party is unwilling or unable to give the firm commitments on childcare, on child benefit or nursery education which are vital to releasing the potential of the women of this country. Consequently, like the Conservatives, Labour falls some way short of providing that which is required to guarantee full equality of opportunity, for all men and women.

# ***Equal Rights, New Opportunities***

**2.0.1 Liberal Democrats have long argued for equality of opportunity for women. In his 1869 essay, *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill, influenced by his partner Harriet Taylor, wrote “*the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now one of the greatest hindrances to human improvement....*”. Women Liberals started to campaign formally for women’s equality in the form of suffrage rights in 1883. Liberal governments were responsible for the introduction of measures such as compulsory education for girls and the right of married women to retain their own property. Liberals have continued to be at the forefront of campaigns to eradicate discrimination on the grounds of sex.**

2.0.2 A practical commitment to equality for women, coupled with a more consensual style of politics, was also at the heart of the SDP. For example, the Party required that one third of those on Parliamentary candidates’ shortlists should be women, a requirement which has been adopted by the Liberal Democrats. The SDP’s approach led directly to a very high level of representation and involvement in the Party by women. This, in turn, led to innovative policy developments, and a new approach to women and matters of concern to women.

2.0.3 The Liberal Democrats are therefore part of a long tradition of campaigning for women’s rights, freedom and choice.

## **2.1 The Liberal Democrat Approach**

2.1.1 Liberal Democrats are committed to creating a society in which all individuals - men and women - are able to fulfil their potential. We

will never tolerate discrimination against men, but we are determined to open up the same opportunities for women. This means ensuring that women, like men, have access to the essential requirements for making choices in their lives: economic independence, an education that does not prejudice their potential, access to work and to public life and necessary health and social services. *Our aim is to create a society in which the full range of opportunities and choices are available to all individuals regardless of their gender, without dictating the direction which they should take.*

2.1.2 Liberal Democrats believe that fundamental reform of the way in which Britain is governed is required to open up new opportunities to all: to disperse power more widely, to protect the rights of individuals, to prevent discrimination, and to promote equality of opportunity as a principle at the heart of policy-making. To these ends, Liberal Democrats are committed to:

- The introduction of a Bill of Rights incorporated into a written constitution, safeguarding individual’s rights and ensuring equal treatment, regardless of gender.
- The establishment of an independent Commission for Human Rights to assist complainants in bringing proceedings under the Bill and to ensure compliance with its provisions.
- The establishment of a Ministry of Justice with responsibilities including the promotion of equality of opportunity throughout government.
- Strengthening current anti-discrimination legislation, by replacing the Sex

Discrimination and Equal Pay Acts with a single, more effective Equal Treatment Act.

- A range of positive action - such as that already embodied in the Liberal Democrat constitution - to address the current under-representation of women at senior levels in the workplace and in public life, including Parliament.

2.1.3 The very significant under-representation of women in Parliament and in public life is evidence that, despite legislation and changes in attitude, women are still excluded from such fields solely on the basis of their gender. To ensure that no person is excluded from participation in the Liberal Democrats on the basis of gender alone, the Party requires that in elections to party bodies and in drawing up shortlists for Parliamentary candidates not less than one-third shall be men and one-third women. We believe that, temporarily, a similar approach may be needed to tackle the wider problems of under-representation, for example, on public bodies, thus ensuring that the voices of both men and women are heard.

## **2.2 A Bill of Rights and a Human Rights Commission**

2.2.1 The role of government is key in ensuring equal treatment. Liberal Democrats are determined to put in place a legislative framework that protects individuals from direct and indirect discrimination on the basis of gender.

2.2.2 Fundamental to this objective is the establishment of a Bill of Rights. The purpose of a Bill of Rights is to protect all citizens against the abuse of power, to place a check on politicians and to make an individual's rights transparent. As such, it is an essential guarantor for men and women of equality before the law and of protection from discrimination.

2.2.3 Liberal Democrats therefore propose the immediate incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law, to be

followed by the establishment of a UK Bill of Rights within a written constitution. We further propose that an independent Commission for Human Rights be established to assist complainants in bringing proceedings under the Bill, to ensure compliance with its provisions, and systematically to review law and practice in the sphere of civil liberties. The Commission would act as an umbrella organisation for the existing Equal Opportunities Commission and Commission for Racial Equality, although its remit would be extended to include discrimination on the grounds of age, religion, disability and sexual orientation. These proposals are set out in further detail in Federal White Paper 6, *Here We Stand* (1993).

## **2.3 An Effective, New Equal Treatment Act**

2.3.1 The assertion of positive but general rights under a Bill of Rights is intended to complement rather than replace specific anti-discrimination legislation. Current legislation, as embodied in the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act and 1970 Equal Pay Act does, however, need overhauling. The present law is tortuous and obscure, it give rises to serious problems of interpretation, it consists largely of a series of prohibitions rather than positive rights and it does not properly reflect tougher European legislation. It is expensive to bring cases under the legislation. Furthermore, there is no mechanism for group remedies, that is to say for applying the outcome in one case to other people in the same jobs. The enforcement procedures are so weak that they have been challenged as an infringement of the UK's obligations under the Equal Pay Directive.

2.3.2 Liberal Democrats would replace the existing Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts (perhaps together with other equal opportunities legislation, such as the Race Relations Act) with a comprehensive, stronger and more enforceable Equal Treatment Act based on a positive declaration that every person has a right to be treated equally. It would cover pay, harassment and direct and indirect discrimination - whether intentional or unintentional - and would draw heavily on European legislation and the

enforcement procedures contained in the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1976 (also see section 4.1).

## 2.4 Equality in Government

2.4.1 Many obstacles to equality of opportunity cannot, however, be tackled by recourse to the law. To address the social and economic inequalities between the sexes requires a fundamental review of all legislation combined with government action to promote equality of opportunity positively and to change attitudes in every sphere of public life. This role requires action, not by a single isolated Ministry for Women (see 1.3.2), but by every government department to ensure that the equality implications of all legislation are fully understood.

2.4.2 We propose therefore that every government department be required to assess whether its proposals would have a differing impact on women than on men. The result of this assessment would then be published, in conjunction with prospective legislation, to inform debate. A separate unit should be set up within our proposed Ministry of Justice (see

Federal White Paper 2, *Partners for Freedom and Justice* (1989)) to oversee this assessment process and to promote equal opportunities outside government. The unit would be responsible for:

- Helping all government departments to undertake a gender assessment of proposed legislation.
- Establishing formal guidelines for government departments describing policies and practices to provide equality of opportunity regardless of sex, race, colour, religion, age, disability or sexual orientation.
- Monitoring and evaluating the development of equal opportunity strategies and setting new targets.

2.4.3 The Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Senedd and local councils throughout the UK would be encouraged to establish similar mechanisms for assessing the gender impact of their own policy proposals.

# Learning Equality

**3.0.1 Liberal Democrats are committed to establishing a society free of “poverty, ignorance and conformity” (Preamble to the Party Constitution) because we believe that poverty, ignorance and conformity restrict the opportunities and choices available to individuals. Education is key to tackling poverty, ignorance and conformity. It provides the skills which an individual needs to gain employment. It gives people information with which to make sound judgments, enabling them to take control over their own lives. It teaches tolerance, and thus strikes at the roots of conformity.**

3.0.2 Historically, the education of girls has been given a lower priority than that of boys. While education has been compulsory for all children for many years now, it still tends to reinforce, rather than confront, gender stereotypes. It is essential that girls and women have access to high quality education and training, and that such education actively promotes the equality of women, opening up to them new opportunities and choices which have previously been restricted - culturally, socially or legally - to men.

3.0.3 Liberal Democrats are committed to a massive expansion in educational opportunities for all. As a result, we are pledged to invest an additional £2 billion in education over twelve months, paid for, if necessary, from an extra penny of income tax. We are prepared to make this investment, because we recognise that, in the long term, education releases people’s potential and enriches our society. We are committed to:

- A substantial increase in investment in education and training.
- Guaranteed access to early years provision for every three and four year old with a commitment to equal opportunities for all children.

- Equal access to all areas of the curriculum for all children.
- The establishment of guidelines for teachers on gender issues in all areas of the curriculum.
- Adequate financial support for adult and continuing education, with particular emphasis on opportunities for women.
- The inclusion of equal opportunities modules in all initial teacher training as an examined component with a required standard before teachers can practice.
- Training programmes and keep-in-touch policies to help women back to work after time out to provide caring.

## 3.1 Education for the Early Years

3.1.1 Children undergo educational and socialising experiences during their early years. It is crucial that formal and informal early years education does not establish gender stereotypes that are later hard to displace. Children form their awareness of the physical differences between people before they are three years old. Often very young children have strong views about appropriate patterns of behaviour for men and women. We therefore recommend that the Ministry of Justice - working closely with the Department for Education, local authorities, teacher unions and other relevant education bodies - draw up guidelines to ensure equal opportunities for *all* children, regardless of gender, and equal opportunities training for providers.

3.1.2 Young children need to develop confidence in as many subject areas as possible in order to equip themselves to make informed choices in later life. Yet the primary school curriculum has

often in the past been identified as weak on science and technology (*Towards Equality for Girls and Boys*, National Union of Teachers, 1994). It is imperative that the primary school curriculum provides for a broad range of study across disciplines - including science and technology - to reduce the chances of one discipline or another becoming the domain of only one sex. Local authorities should take the lead in addressing such concerns, promoting equal opportunities by providing training and support for teachers.

## 3.2 Secondary Education

3.2.1 There are many differences between the experiences of boys and girls in secondary schools. Girls experience a different interplay between family and school life, just as women do between work and home in later life. Studies in the USA found that, there, seven times more girls than boys dropped out of school to care for parents or siblings, or their own children.

3.2.2 In later secondary education, subject choices become increasingly gender specific. Even when there are no formal gender restrictions, social and cultural pressures tend to mean that girls are encouraged to study arts and social science subjects, while boys are pushed towards maths, science and technology. Since there is no evidence to suggest that this gender divide reflects different gender aptitudes (if anything the reverse may be true) more must be done to promote real gender equality in education.

3.2.3 The Government has steadfastly refused to address this issue. The national curriculum, which could have been an opportunity to ensure access to all subjects for all students, was introduced without consideration for its gender impact. In fact, many of the Government's initiatives have limited educational opportunities. In England and Wales, the introduction of opting out and the weakening of local education authorities has led to the loss of expertise on equal opportunity issues. Proposals for the establishment of City Technology Colleges no

longer have to include a commitment to equal access across the curriculum for girls and boys.

3.2.4 In order to address these imbalances, Liberal Democrats would:

- Back research on the causes of gender imbalance in education, with the aim of ensuring that all children have equal access to all areas of the curriculum.
- Introduce, in consultation with teaching unions and professional bodies, guidelines for teachers on gender issues in all areas of the national curriculum. For instance, the history syllabus should cover the achievements of both men and women.
- Require all schools to develop equal opportunities policies, identifying areas for improvement, strategies for achieving those improvements, and targets for measuring progress.

3.2.5 Liberal Democrats are committed to guaranteeing every child access to all aspects of a much more flexible and greatly reduced national curriculum or minimum curriculum entitlement (see English White Paper 6, *Excellence for All*, 1992). While parents must be free to determine the social, religious, cultural or moral framework within which their children are educated, neither an educational establishment nor a parent should have the right to deny a child access to the core skills or objective information that that child will need to equip himself or herself for adult life. All schools should therefore be required to ensure that all pupils have access to the minimum curriculum entitlement, whether in the school or in another forum agreed between the school and parents (see also 7.1.2).

3.2.6 Liberal Democrats believe in the importance of education for citizenship, a significant part of which is an exploration of the prejudices prevalent within society and their effects. We therefore believe that the citizenship studies should include time for analysis of gender stereotyping. It is also important that both boys and girls benefit from parenting and domestic life classes - skills which must not be treated purely as the domain of women.

3.2.7 Research has shown that there are a number of advantages for girls in receiving a single sex education. For example, a study by the Inner London Education Authority in 1980 found that girls were 25% more likely to take science-based subjects if they studied at a single, rather than a mixed, sex school. Although it would be preferable for all children to be able to receive equal access and equal advantage from education in mixed establishments, this is often not the case. We therefore see no problem with parents choosing to send their children to single sex schools should they so wish. There may also be a role for single sex education within mixed institutions. Liberal Democrats believe that mixed institutions should be free to experiment with the use of single sex classes.

3.2.8 We support positive action to ensure that all girls are fully aware of the range of opportunities open to them. For example, we favour career shadowing schemes for girls, particularly those interested in non-traditional careers.

### **3.3 Tertiary Education and Flexible Learning**

3.3.1 The gender imbalances of secondary education get much worse into further and higher education. Access for women to tertiary education is restricted by the inflexibility of full-time courses, the lack of available childcare and the inadequacy of student financial support (including support for the care of dependants). As a result, women predominate on part-time courses, usually paying their own expenses, whereas men predominate on full-time and sandwich courses, usually attracting financial support from the government or employer.

3.3.2 Liberal Democrats are committed to ensuring that women have the same opportunities to enter higher or further education as men. We would:

- Require that all 16-18 year olds spend at least two days a week in education or training, working towards attaining recognised qualifications.

- Aim to improve financial support for adult education and extend student financial support to assist those studying part-time.
- Establish an entitlement for every adult to a period of training or education, to be taken at a time of their choice and to be based on learning costs. We would start by make this entitlement available to lone parents and the long term unemployed.
- Increase information on educational opportunities, targeted specifically at women.
- Encourage colleges to make adequate care facilities available for those with dependants.
- End upper age limits on admissions and discretionary grants, encouraging institutions to be more positive towards the recruitment of older women.

3.3.3 We also recognise the importance of adult education. It not only increases academic knowledge, but also helps to build social cohesion. In particular, women, who sometimes feel isolated in the home, can benefit from this social function. We would therefore seek to restore the cuts in adult education which have been made by the present Government. We would provide financial support for non-vocational courses.

### **3.4 Working with the Educators**

3.4.1 In 1991, there were over 50,000 more female teachers than male ones in English and Welsh schools. More than half of all them were in primary schools. Yet while women comprised 80% of primary school staff, they held only half of the primary school headteacherships. A much higher proportion of male than female teachers were given incentive allowances. Thus, a vast reservoir of talent lies untapped.

3.4.3 Liberal Democrats recognise that fully utilising the skills and energies of all teachers is key to the provision of quality education. Fair appointment and promotion procedures help to

ensure that the talents of all staff are released and confidence promoted, thus lifting staff morale. An institution which operates an equal opportunities policy in relation to appointments and promotion also provides a positive role model for its students. For all these reasons, Liberal Democrats are committed to:

- The inclusion of equal opportunities modules in all initial teacher training as an examined component with a required standard before teachers can practice.
- The establishment of equal opportunities strategies throughout education, agreed between institutions, local authorities, teacher unions and the Government.

### 3.5 Training and Retraining

3.5.1 Paid employment is key to economic independence, yet while women now make up nearly half of the workforce, few break through the glass ceiling into senior positions in business or public life (see Chapters 4 and 9). While there are clearly a number of reasons for this, poor training provision is clearly significant.

3.5.2 The problems faced by women are most serious for those entering or reentering the job market. In 1989, almost 1 in 3 men between 16 and 19 received job-related training; the figure was only 1 in 5 for women of the same age. The substantial majority of those receiving training through the government-sponsored training scheme, Employment Training, are men (69% in 1989-90) and women are concentrated in traditionally female areas, such as hairdressing and office work. The scheme fails to give high priority to the needs of women returners, nor does it provide childcare. Part-time workers are substantially less likely than full-timers to receive training, disproportionately affecting women because of their employment patterns. Young women from ethnic minorities face particular difficulties and pressures. Even those companies that do have substantial training budgets, rarely have formal training strategies, so that training is provided only to those who ask

for it, a system which favours senior employees and men.

3.5.3 The principle obstacles to women receiving training are a lack of childcare; costs, direct and indirect; time and transport constraints; and a lack of information about what is available. To address these problems, we would:

- Encourage the Government to provide training programmes designed specifically to meet the needs of women returners.
- Introduce a remissible training levy for businesses. This would be set at 2% of payroll to help fund the national costs of training. The levy would be reimbursed in circumstances where an employer was already spending more than this amount on training.
- Encourage research, training opportunities and conferences to educate employers in the advantages of training. All those employing over twenty people would be encouraged to put in place equal opportunities in-training policies, to be agreed with local authorities.
- Encourage employers to maintain keep-in-touch policies, and review their selection and promotion procedures to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of age, to promote equal opportunities for women returners.

3.5.4 There is a growing awareness that office 'culture' can affect women's work performances. Senior managers need training to recognise this, and to help them explore possible changes that may free their employees to work more constructively. For example, assertiveness skills courses for male managers, as well as for female managers, can improve the working environment for all. This cultural change is a difficult one, but one where great improvements for women could be made, and one where training, for men and women, has an important role to play.

# Equality at Work

**4.0.1 A woman's ability to secure economic independence - and with it a greater range of choices and opportunities - is crucially dependent upon access to work. Women in the UK now comprise 44% of the country's total workforce, a participation rate second only in the European Union to Denmark. Yet women's average full-time hourly earnings are still only 79% of men's, a wider gap than in almost every other European Union country. It is estimated that a British woman loses the equivalent of 57% of her potential life-time earnings when she has a baby. Half the jobs women do are part-time, and 80% of part-time workers in Britain are women; these workers are generally low paid and have little job security.**

4.0.2 The position of women has undoubtedly improved over the last fifty years. Nearly three-quarters of all women of working age are now in the workforce and women are breaking into areas of the labour market previously largely restricted to men. For example, between 1984 and 1993, the number of women lawyers more than trebled to 28,000 and women now account for over half of all law students; women constitute 42% of those employed in the media industry and 29% of doctors and dentists.

4.0.3 Yet many problems still remain. The barriers to equal participation in the labour market include inadequate childcare, lack of training (for both young women and adult returners), poor maternity rights, poor quality public transport, unequal pay and benefits, inflexible hours, an uneven division of domestic labour and financial disincentives. These barriers reflect traditional assumptions and prejudices about the work that men and women do and the role they play in society. So-called 'women's work' has been marginalised in an industrial economy which equates all work with paid employment. The low status accorded to unpaid housework or caring work is often carried

through to other jobs traditionally done by women. Whether largely female occupations are rated as unskilled because they use women or whether women are employed because they provide cheap labour, status and good pay is denied to them. The deregulation of the labour market by the Conservatives on the assumption that people will 'price themselves back into work' has in reality often meant lower pay, poorer terms and conditions and less job security. Again, it is women who have borne the brunt as low skill, low wage, largely service sector jobs - such as cleaning and catering - have been contracted out.

4.0.4 The traditional assumptions about the respective roles of men and women, also adversely affect men. Society places great pressures on men to enter the labour market, rather than to share, or even take over household or caring responsibilities. Men are often judged not on the quality of their work but the hours that they do. British men on average work longer hours than their European counterparts and such pressures often cut men off from their families.

4.0.5 Liberal Democrats do not want to coerce women or men into specific roles or jobs. We recognise the value of paid and unpaid work equally. Our aim is to ensure that both women and men have access to the full range of choices and opportunities in work by:

- Strengthening the position of women in the workplace, by replacing the Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Acts with an Equal Treatment Act (see section 4.1).
- Improving the parental rights of both women and men (see section 4.2).
- Ensuring that employees in the UK have the same rights as those elsewhere in the EU, by opting into the Social Protocol of the Maastricht Treaty (see section 4.4).

- Addressing the problem of the low wages by introducing a regionally-varied minimum hourly rate of pay applicable to all adults in paid employment.
- Improving access for women to education and training (see Chapter 3).
- Improving the provision of and support for childcare (see Chapter 5).

## 4.1 A New Deal at Work

4.1.1 Legislation to outlaw discrimination in pay has narrowed the gap between male and female earnings, but a substantial difference remains. For instance, the average weekly earnings of women manual workers in hairdressing is £110.30, as against a national average of £221.20 for manual workers. Some of the wages gap can be explained by the lack of opportunity women have in education and work, and the caring responsibilities which are primarily taken on by them. Until such time as women are given the chance to overcome such problems with policies such as improved childcare provision, carers' support, and training programmes such differentials will certainly remain.

4.1.2 But the lack of opportunities for women are only part of the problem. Many pay inequalities are historical and have become enshrined in pay structures and collective agreements. The segregation of work into jobs which are perceived to be for men and others which are for women has made it easier for such historical differentials to be maintained without challenge. The gradual breaking down of this job segregation may help to alleviate this situation over time, but more direct action is also needed, since the Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Acts have failed to address these problems. Indeed, the Trades Union Congress and the Equal Opportunities Commission have questioned whether the legislation adequately discharges the UK's obligations under the EU's Equal Pay directive.

4.1.3 In replacing the existing legislation with an Equal Treatment Act, we would aim, in particular, to strengthen the ways in which discrimination could be countered, unintentional

and indirect discrimination as well as direct. Building on recent legislative experience in Canada as well as the enforcement procedures of the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act, the Equal Treatment Act would:

- Toughen the responsibility on employers to establish equal opportunities procedures for their firms and to ensure that inequalities in recruitment, promotion or pay and conditions are *not* the result of discrimination.
- Address discrimination in pay and conditions, by requiring that the value of jobs usually done by women be directly compared with the value of *different* jobs usually done by men.
- Set up equality tribunals with specialists in discrimination law to hear cases.
- Apply collective remedies (otherwise known as class actions) in equal treatment cases, so that where discrimination is proven all those in the same jobs would be eligible for redress, rather than just those bringing the case.
- Extend to the private sector the removal of the upper limits on back pay and damages for discrimination.

4.1.4 The Human Rights Commission (see section 2.2) would be responsible for helping employers to comply with the new Act. It would be expected to publish formal guidelines for employers on how to undertake gender neutral job evaluation and prevent job segregation. The guidelines would cover training, advertising and the best bases for comparisons between jobs, including skills, level of education, responsibilities (such as decision-making, responsibility for budgets and equipment) and working conditions. All employers of over a hundred people would be expected to publish in their annual reports their own plans to ensure pay equity and end job segregation within a set period (something which many firms already do, to protect themselves against the threat of litigation under current legislation). Those companies employing over ten people would be expected to be able demonstrate that they were seeking to provide equal opportunities, if

challenged by an individual employee or by the Commission.

4.1.5 *We explicitly reject the notion of 'quotas' in the workplace for either sex.* Quotas lead inevitably to individuals being employed, not on the basis of their ability but their gender. However, continuing and substantial discrepancies in the balance between the sexes in a particular firm over a significant period of time may well indicate that discrimination is taking place. Hence, we would also give the Human Rights Commission the power to investigate complaints in such cases. If the Commission believed that, over a period of time, appointments by a particular firm failed to reflect the pool from which properly qualified applicants are drawn, this could form the basis of a challenge to the firm's equal opportunities procedures.

4.1.6 In all sex discrimination cases, employers would be expected to show that discrepancies were *not* the result of discrimination, rather than an employee having to demonstrate that they were. In such cases, it would be a defence for a firm to be able to show that it had followed clear equal opportunities procedures.

4.1.7 We would expect the Government to ensure that the funding of the Human Rights Commission was commensurate with its additional responsibilities under this new Act.

## 4.2 Improving Parental Rights

4.2.1 The UK has the worst parental rights in the European Union. Despite new legislation introduced in October 1993, designed to comply with the European directive on the health and safety of pregnant women, British women are still entitled to the equivalent of only eight weeks on full pay. This compares with 16 weeks in Greece, 17 in Italy and 22 in Denmark.

4.2.2 An estimated 4000 women were dismissed last year as a result of becoming pregnant. We welcome the protection given in the new legislation from dismissal on these grounds and

the rights to alternative work or suspension on full pay where jobs would otherwise be harmful to health.

4.2.3 The lack of a statutory right to paternity leave reinforces the assumption of employers and society as a whole that it is the mother who is exclusively responsible for caring for a new child. It means that men are excluded from caring opportunities.

4.2.4 While endorsing the new maternity rights as a step in the right direction, we believe that parental rights as a whole should be extended further to match standards for fathers and mothers elsewhere in the EU. We would:

- Seek to extend maternity rights with the aim, over time, of phasing in a statutory right to leave on the equivalent of full pay for 18 weeks and introducing new maternity rights for the 2.25 million low paid and part-time workers who are currently excluded.
- Introduce a statutory right to paternity leave.
- Provide an entitlement of up to 10 days family leave per year for child illness or childcare problems.
- Give adoptive parents (excluding step parents) a proportion of maternity rights to cover pre-adoption appointments.
- Place the onus of proof on the employer rather than the individual employees in cases where dismissal is alleged to be on the grounds of pregnancy.

## 4.3 Part-Time, Low Paid and Self Employment

4.3.1 Most of the recent growth in employment has been in part-time work (from 23% of the workforce in 1979 to 29% in 1993). 80% of part-time workers are women. Many women prefer to work part-time, welcoming the extra flexibility it sometimes brings. Liberal Democrats believe that all large employers should open posts to part-time, job share or flexi-

hours work, or else be able to show a reason as to why this cannot be done.

4.3.2 Part-time work is not, however, without its problems. Many of the women who work part-time might prefer full-time jobs were adequate childcare or care support available. Part-time workers have little employment protection, prospects and working conditions are often poor, and jobs are frequently low paid and low skill. While the hourly pay of full-time women workers is 79% of that for men working full time, for part-time women the figure is only 59%.

4.3.3 Liberal Democrats welcome the recent extension of certain employment rights, including inclusion in company pension schemes and some maternity rights, to some part-time workers. We would also:

- Extend to part-timers the same rights as full-timers on a pro rata basis, including the right to a written contract of employment.
- Encourage the extension of share option schemes to all employees.
- Introduce a regionally-varied minimum hourly rate applicable to all adults in paid employment based upon the recommendations of a Low Pay Commission.

These proposals are described in more detail in Policy Paper 9, *Working for Change*, (1994).

4.3.4 Self-employment amongst women rose from 639,000 to 790,000 in the decade 1984-93. 500,000 of those women work from home, in a range of occupations from information technology to design, from garment making to sales. Home working has the advantage of facilitating the combination of domestic and employment responsibilities and of reducing commuter pollution but it suffers from inappropriate house design, lack of training, poor career prospects as well as isolation. Liberal Democrats would:

- Encourage developers and local authorities to provide telecottages where appropriate.
- Include home based employees in normal employment benefits.
- Provide mini-loans for start-up exercises and encourage banks to reduce demands for security on small loans, which women find particularly difficult to provide.

## 4.4 Europe: Championing British Women's Rights

4.4.1 Women have particular reason to welcome the role of the European Union in influencing British legislation. Most UK equal opportunities legislation over the past fifteen years has been driven by Europe. European funds have been provided for the creation of small businesses by women. UK maternity benefits and equal pay legislation have been improved as a result of European Commission directives and Court decisions, and the rights of part-time workers have been extended.

4.4.2 Liberal Democrats cannot see why employees in Britain should not enjoy the same rights as those elsewhere in the European Union. We believe that the UK should play an active role in shaping European social policy by opting into the Social Protocol of the Maastricht treaty. We support the Protocol's objectives to ensure:

- Freedom for all to choose and engage in an occupation fairly remunerated.
- Improvements in working conditions especially for part-time and temporary workers.
- Access to life long vocational training.
- A decent standard of living on retirement.
- More family friendly working hours.

# Attacking Poverty

5.0.1 The UK's tax and benefits system is built on a number of out-dated assumptions that ill-serve both men and women. It assumes that most men, unless ill or disabled, will hold jobs throughout their working lives; that most women with children will be supported by their husbands; that families consist of a married couple with children; that unpaid work is socially less valuable than paid work.

5.0.2 With three million people unemployed, one in three marriages ending in divorce and a third of all children born out of wedlock, these assumptions no longer hold true, if they ever did. The tax and benefits systems need to reflect today's realities. Liberal Democrats believe that their main aims should be to challenge disadvantage, reduce poverty, and foster opportunity and independence.

## 5.1 Reforming Taxes

Built into the tax system are a number of mechanisms which indirectly discriminate against women and reduce their economic independence. The relationship between national insurance contributions (NICs) and benefits, the high marginal taxes charged on low earners, and the incentives built into employers' taxes to keep wages low, all militate against women. The tax contribution an individual makes in NICs determines whether they are entitled to receive certain 'contributory' benefits, most notably the state pension and Unemployment Benefit. Many women are unable to make the necessary contributions because of their disrupted career patterns. This leaves them exposed to poverty after retirement or when unemployed. To address all these problems, Liberal Democrats would:

- Abolish the contributory principle and national insurance contributions, merging them into the same tax base as income tax.

- Remove the incentive for employers to keep workers on very low wages, by making a business' tax liability calculable as a percentage of its total wage bill.
- Take 50,000 very low earners (mainly women) out of the tax net altogether by raising the level at which people have to start paying tax.

These proposals are described in more detail in Policy Paper , *Opportunity and Independence for All*, (1994).

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***Liberal Democrats aim to  
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opportunity and independence***

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## 5.2 Reforming Benefits

5.2.1 The vast majority of the poorest people in the UK are women; lone parents, pensioners, carers, and the unemployed are all among those on very low incomes. The majority of claimants of most of the major benefits, other than contributory benefits, are women. Women are more reliant on means-tested benefits and the lower value categorical benefits than on the contributory benefits which were supposed to form the core of the post World War Two social security scheme. This reflects the fact that the scheme was established to reflect male employment patterns in an age when most women still looked to husbands for financial support. Women's interrupted employment histories and generally lower earnings put them at a disadvantage. Two and a quarter million

women are officially estimated to be excluded from the contributory scheme altogether because their earnings fall below the lower earnings limit.

5.2.2 Many means-tested benefits are confusing, bureaucratic to administer and inadequate. Overlapping tapers (the rates at which benefits are withdrawn) create severe poverty traps, as can the withdrawal of 'passported' benefits (ones such as free prescriptions and school meals which are linked to income support). Some individuals, particularly the low paid and part-time workers are excluded from benefit entitlement altogether, although they live in poverty.

5.2.3 It is our aim to ensure that every individual, male or female can meet their caring responsibilities, can live in dignity, and can afford to work so that no-one is worse off as a result of taking a job. We would:

- Retain and increase Child Benefit as a universal benefit.
- Combine Family Credit with Income Support to create a single means-tested benefit called Low Income Benefit, thus reducing the poverty trap. Low Income Benefit would be split between partners, if they were non-earners or low earners, or paid to the non-earner where the other was earning.
- Reform the Social Fund by introducing special grants for particular items, with a smaller discretionary element on top. We would provide grants for the "major life events" such as moving house or having a child (a maternity grant).

5.2.4 We would examine ways in which the benefits system could, in the long term, be adapted to enable each individual to be assessed separately, as now happens in the tax system, rather than as part of a household or couple.

## 5.3 Improving Pensions

5.3.1 Poverty in old age is a key problem amongst women. Two-thirds of all those over retirement age and four-fifths of those over 85

are women. Women have therefore borne the brunt of the decline in the value of the state pension relative to earnings. Women who spend time at home caring for children or older people, often forfeit their full state entitlement by foregoing the opportunity to make full national insurance contributions, yet the work they do is no less valid. Furthermore, because women often spend some years out of employment or working part-time, they have less chance to supplement their state pension with SERPS payments, or occupational or personal pensions; they are therefore no substitute for a properly resourced and fairly distributed basic state pension. (The proposals which follow are set out in more detail in Federal Green Paper 31, *Retirement with Dignity*, 1993).

### State Pensions

5.3.2 When state pensions were first introduced it was assumed that married women would be supported in their old age by their husbands. Since the second world war, however, this assumption has become out-dated. As a result, many women have been left with inadequate provision for old age.

5.3.3 In 1978, the law was reformed to try to address this problem, making women of 60 entitled to a contributory basic state pension. Those not in paid employment and caring for children or sick relatives had their contributions waived for up to 20 years. The reforms, however, failed to provide women with the necessary safety net: many working women cannot afford to make full contributions; woman working part-time still lose their entitlement to have contributions waived; married women over retirement age have to wait for their husbands to retire before becoming entitled to a reduced pension. Consequently, 85% of women do not receive the full state pension. Half of all women pensioners live on less than £50 a week.

5.3.4 Liberal Democrats would address all these problems by severing the link between contributions and pensions. Abolishing the contributory principle would mean that all those over retirement age would receive state pensions,

subject not to their contributory record but to their residency.

5.3.5 The state should concentrate on providing an adequate basic pension, rather than on trying to run earnings-related schemes which divert money from those in real need. Liberal Democrats would seek to raise the total state pension at least to the same level as income support and would index it to average earnings. We would transfer responsibility for earnings-related pensions to the private sector (while preserving accrued SERPS rights). To stop costs from escalating, the total pension would comprise two elements: a basic pension and an additional part paid to those in greatest need, the majority of whom would doubtlessly be women. Both these changes would ensure that public money was channelled directly to those pensioners in greatest need.

5.3.6 Liberal Democrats are committed to introducing a flexible 'decade of retirement', with citizens entitled to start drawing the basic pension at any time between the ages of 60 and 70, with a higher pension paid to those retiring later. The pivotal age for the decade of retirement (the age at which pensions rights would be equalised) would be 65. Those for whom a reduced pension starting before 65 would be inadequate for subsistence would be eligible for an income support 'top up' and would be transferred to the standard pension at 65.

## **Occupational and Personal Pensions**

5.3.7 In the early part of this century, when occupational pension schemes were beginning to spread, many did not allow married women employees to join. In 1978, the law was changed to require all employers' schemes to give equal access to all employees in similar circumstances. It is still the case, however, that only 21% of women receive occupational pensions, as opposed to 60% of men. Despite action as a result of pressure from the European courts, there is still sex discrimination in occupational and personal pensions. For example, women still get smaller pensions than do men for the same amount of money put in, because of their greater life expectancy. Liberal Democrats would amend the law to require occupational and personal pensions schemes to give equal benefits to men and women for equal contributions or payments. This would include benefits for dependants and survivors.

## **Pensions On Divorce**

5.3.8 Pension rights are often the most valuable asset in a divorce. With divorces running at over 150,000 a year, it is essential that such rights can be split between a separating couple, whether they be in a marriage or common law relationship. We would introduce legislation to allow pension rights accrued during a period of cohabitation to be split between the partners on divorce or separation. The amount transferred would be assessed as a transfer value, and invested in a separate fund for the former partner.

# Sharing the Caring

**6.0.1 It is a sign of a civilised society that the community as a whole shares responsibility for the provision of care. At present, whilst many men are carers and many more might wish to be, the burden of caring - for children, for older people or for people with an illness or disability - still largely falls on women, particularly those of working age. Unless the challenges presented by the growing need for care are properly addressed, women will continue to be shut out from paid employment and economic independence, while men will find their own choice to provide caring restricted.**

6.0.2 Politicians may pay lip-service to the value of families, but the way that family or caring responsibilities are treated by government tells a different story. The needless rigidities of the UK's systems of employment and social security mean that many people with family or caring responsibilities are unable continue in paid work. They are forced into dependency upon inadequate state benefits, lose economic independence and can become isolated from the community.

6.0.3 The provision of good quality care is fundamental to building stable and healthy communities. We believe that the low value placed on 'caring', as a profession or voluntary activity, undermines this objective. And because caring is largely undertaken by women this view devalues the work that women do.

6.0.4 In Policy Paper 1, *A Caring Society* (1993) and Policy Paper 7, *Opportunity and Independence for All* (1994), Liberal Democrats set out a number of proposals to improve both the quality of care provision and the lives of those that provide care. Here, we develop those proposals to show how they would give women who take on caring responsibilities a real choice and would allow carers to retain their economic independence. As ever, our aim is to

extend the range of opportunities available to both men and women. We propose:

- The development of a National Childcare Strategy, implemented by local authorities.
- Improvements in financial support for meeting the costs of childcare and caring for older people or people with disabilities.
- The introduction of a Carer's Benefit.
- More training be made available for professional and informal carers.
- Reform of the tax and benefits systems to ensure that those whose working patterns are disrupted by caring responsibilities are not penalised (See Chapter 5).

## 6.1 Caring for Children

6.1.1 The lack of good quality, affordable childcare is the biggest single barrier to opportunity and economic independence for women. The UK's record in providing childcare is the worse in the EU and the UK is the only EU country without a formal childcare policy. Whereas Denmark offers publicly funded childcare services for 48% of under 3s, 85% of 3 and 4 year olds, and out of school care for 29% of primary school children, Britain offers help to just 2% of under 3s and to just 35% of 3 and 4 year olds (mainly in nursery schools).

6.1.2 As a result, while the economic position of women as a whole is improving, women with children and particularly lone mothers are being left behind. While 71% of all women are now in paid employment that figure drops to 63% for women with children and to just 50% for lone mothers. Young women without children are earning 90% of what men of the same age are paid. It is only when women have children the earnings gap really opens up. Britain is the only

country in the European Union where lone mothers are *less* likely to be in employment than women with a partner.

6.1.3 Liberal Democrats believe that helping parents - particularly women and lone parents - to meet the costs of childcare is an essential prerequisite to greater independence and ultimately to increasing opportunities for all. The advantages of better childcare provision extend well beyond the direct beneficiaries. By helping women back into the workforce, it can bring substantial savings on benefits and increased contributions in tax. 70% of lone parents live on welfare benefits; of this figure, 55% of lone mothers say they would immediately seek work if affordable child care were available (*Equal Opportunities Commission survey*).

6.1.4 Such benefits are widely acknowledged by groups including the Employers for Childcare, the Confederation of British Industry and the Trades Union Congress. They have urged the Government to establish a nationwide, affordable childcare programme. Liberal Democrats are committed to the establishment of just such a national childcare strategy implemented by local authorities and based on a mixture of public, private and voluntary sector provision.

6.1.5 Of course there is no single form of childcare to suit the needs of all parents and children; flexibility is therefore the key. Each local authorities must be responsible for devising its own childcare strategy to meet local needs, but the Government must lead the way, providing financial and political support for local initiatives and new funds to make a real difference at local level.

6.1.6 In England, the role of devising the national childcare strategy would fall to the Department for Education. The Department would establish national guidelines for local authorities on issues such as educational content, staffing and training for childcare workers, and would seek to raise the status of those workers.

6.1.7 We would expect each local authority to:

- Develop a local childcare plan to provide for all children under five and ensure access to nursery education for all three and four year olds.
- Work with local businesses, voluntary groups and parents in making and paying for that provision.
- Extend out of school and holidays play schemes for 5 to 14-year olds.

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6.1.8 Many of these initiatives would take time to implement and would need to be introduced gradually. We therefore reaffirm the proposals set out in Policy Paper 7, *Opportunity and Independence for All* (1994) as the first steps to improve childcare provision in the UK. We would seek to:

- Develop further the ‘disregard’ for Family Credit purposes of £40 of earnings spent on child care, and extend it to Income Support.
- Extend the present tax relief on workplace nurseries to other forms of child care.
- Introduce a voucher system to enable employed parents to claim tax relief on the costs of child care by any approved nursery or childminder.

6.1.9 The costs of increasing childcare provision must not fall solely on employers or they will not employ women. Nor must they fall to parents alone or women will not be able to afford to work. We will therefore explore ways in which the costs of improving childcare services can be shared between government, employers and parents.

## Reforming the Child Support Agency

6.1.10 The reform of the Child Support Act is of particular significance in the protection of children and of those who care for them. The old system of child support was not a success. Maintenance awards varied enormously from case to case and whether payments were made at all depended upon the goodwill of non-custodial parents. Consequently, many single mothers were forced to live off barely adequate benefits, whilst their partners took no responsibility whatsoever for their children. The aim of the Child Support Act was to address these problems.

6.1.11 The operation of the Act has, however, been seriously flawed. In part, this is because it is retrospective and takes too little account of previous settlements and new family arrangements entered in good faith. The formula by which liability is calculated is too inflexible. We would reform the operation of the Act by:

- Amending the formula to take account of any transfer of property rights in the divorce settlement, including any transfer of money from the sale of the marital home.
- Changing the Agency's operational priorities from increasing payments from parents already paying something, to recovering maintenance from those who pay none.
- Repealing the provision in the Act which enables a lone mother's benefit to be reduced if she refuses unreasonably to disclose the father's identity. Instead, we would provide an incentive for disclosure by introducing a higher disregard for Income Support on money from maintenance. As a result, if the Child Support Agency recovered maintenance payments the custodial parent's total income would increase, as is already the case when that parent is not in receipt of benefit.
- Setting up a body to review cases in which assessments cause extreme hardship.

## 6.2 Caring for Older People and People with Disabilities

6.2.1 According to the General Household Survey of 1990, 13% of men (2.9 million) and 17% of women (3.9 million) provide care to an elderly, sick or disabled relative. Women are more likely to take the main responsibility for looking after such a person (6% of men and 10% of women) and are also more likely to devote more than 20 hours per week to caring (3% of men and 4% of women). The peak age for becoming a 'carer' (for an elderly, sick or disabled person, as opposed to a child) is between 45-64; 24% of people in this age group have caring responsibilities, usually for a parent. A disproportionate number of those affected are women.

6.2.2 Present benefit provision for carers is wholly inadequate. Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) is one of the lowest income maintenance benefits, equivalent to just 11% of national average earnings. Less than one fifth of full-time carers receive ICA because of qualifying restrictions and only 0.5% of the entire social security budget is spent on carers.

6.2.3 Liberal Democrats are committed to enabling carers to remain within paid employment whenever possible. We are equally committed to helping those who have left paid employment temporarily in order to be carers, to return as swiftly and easily as possible to paid work if they should so wish. Nevertheless, since we believe that caring is an activity which requires skill, patience and resources, our proposed policies place a tangible value and appropriate reward on this work.

6.2.4 For some time, we have advocated the introduction of a Carer's Benefit (See Policy Paper 1, *A Caring Society*, 1993). In recognition of the financial hardship endured by carers and the savings to the exchequer of maintaining elderly or disabled people in the community rather than in residential settings, Liberal Democrats would introduce a carer's benefit at a level equivalent to unemployment (or job

seeker's) benefit. This would be paid pro-rata to part-time carers. We would seek to extend payment of that benefit to carers who are themselves older, particularly women aged 60 and over. The abolition of the contributory principle, would ensure that those whose working patterns are disrupted by the assumption of caring responsibilities did not lose benefits entitlement (see section 5.1).

## **Supporting Carers**

6.2.5 Whether people become carers by choice or default, and regardless of how willingly they assume this tough and demanding role, they will need support or a break from time to time. Although mechanisms exist for practical help for carers, a recent survey showed that over half of all carers received no regular visits from health professionals or social services. The recognition of the need for carers' support in the Community Care Act - with its insistence that their needs should be included in Community Care Plans - has not yet led to a marked increase in services.

6.2.6 Liberal Democrats believe that the Government's failure to invest in carers' support

is a false economy. The costs of the residential and nursing care that become necessary when people fail to cope with the physical and financial demands of care in the community are far higher than the costs of supporting carers properly. We are therefore committed not only to placing a high priority on the funding of community care, but also to guaranteeing rights to respite care including short term residential relief, advice and counselling for carers, in addition to having their needs assessed separately.

6.2.7 There is an assumption that anyone who has or acquires caring responsibilities will automatically be able to fulfil them without any training. Tragic incidents of children dying as a result of the neglect or ignorance of parents often make for scandalous headlines; where the victim is elderly this is less likely to be so. With the advent of care in the community, it is becoming increasingly common for people without professional training or qualifications to be providing care. We believe that all such carers should have access to training and should have their achievements formally recognised (see also Policy Paper 1, *A Caring Society*, 1994).

# Health and Opportunity

**7.0.1 Liberal Democrats believe that the National Health Service should be available to all and free at the point of delivery. It should offer quality and choice for all. As mothers and carers, women inevitably make more use of the NHS than do men. Women account for the vast majority of NHS workers. Despite both these facts, however, women continue get a poor deal from the NHS in many respects.**

7.0.2 The risk factors that contribute to ill-health - poverty, poor housing and an unhealthy environment - disproportionately affect women. Women can find health care more difficult to obtain than men (possibly as a result of their unwillingness to push their cases with health professionals), according to research undertaken by the Health Services Research Unit in 1992. There are significant discrepancies between the diagnoses and treatment of diseases in women which are unexplained. While equal numbers of women and men qualify as doctors, far too few women reach the top grades. Liberal Democrats are committed to ensuring that women receive equal treatment from the NHS and, more generally, to improving the services that they receive. As a first step, to address these problems, Liberal Democrats would:

- Promote the equal treatment of the sexes at every level within the health service, including both users and staff.
- Require hospitals to include within their clinical audits an analysis of diagnoses and treatments by gender, so that discrepancies can be more readily identified and, where appropriate, tackled.
- Endeavour to ensure that, wherever practicable, women have the option of consulting female health professionals.
- sexual matters via health education departments and health promotion.

- Encourage the provision of transport to and child care at health centres and, where appropriate, the availability of interpreters to help people from ethnic minorities.

## 7.1 Improving Health Education and Promotion

7.1.1 Liberal Democrats recognise the recent attempts to promote preventive health care and fully support the Government's *Health of the Nation* targets. They continue, however, to fall some way short of what is required. In particular, Liberal Democrats deplore the patchy nature of health and sex education in schools which, by failing to inform women about their own anatomy and physiology, often prevents them from seeking the help they need.

7.1.2 Young people have a right to accurate facts about physiology and sex for the sake of their own health. Parents have a right to have that information conveyed within a moral and religious context which they find acceptable. That right does not, however, extend to denying young people information, the lack of which might endanger the person's health. We would:

- Make objective, critical and pluralistic sex and health education a mandatory element of our proposed minimum curriculum entitlement, whether that education be provided in school or in another forum agreed between the parents and the school.
- Commission more effective publicity campaigns to highlight the fact that women can contract AIDS more easily than men from heterosexual sex, and that the disease is spreading amongst women of all ages.
- Require health professionals to ensure the availability of continuing education on

7.1.3 We would give high priority to the screening of both men and women for treatable conditions, such as some cancers and high blood pressure. We would encourage all women to undergo screening for breast and cervical cancer, especially those that currently make least use of these facilities. The results of screening tests should always be sent to patients as soon as possible.

7.1.4 The low self-esteem many women suffer prevents them dealing adequately with doctors who fail to understand their problems. Health professionals should recognise this and be trained to ensure that all women have their health problems properly investigated and treated.

## 7.2 Accessibility of Services

7.2.1 Women often find it difficult to gain access to health services because of fear of travelling alone or the difficulties of public transportation especially when travelling with small children. Liberal Democrats are committed to improving public transport and would encourage ‘hospital bus’ schemes jointly funded with Local Authorities and Health Authorities. We commend the efforts made in this regard by Liberal Democrat-run Richmond upon Thames.

7.2.2 Liberal Democrats fully support the formation of primary health care teams based on general practices, to bring all health professionals closer to women. Primary health care centres with diagnostic and out-patient department facilities also assist women in gaining access to health care. Health service facilities and general practice surgeries in particular should have more flexible opening hours to make services more accessible to both men and women.

## 7.3 Mental Health

7.3.1 Discrimination against women often occurs in mental health services. There is evidence that women are more likely to be diagnosed as mentally ill and prescribed

education. Older women and black women in particular suffer from discrimination when they fail to conform to stereotypical ideas of how women should behave. The failure to provide women-only wards in mental health settings is scandalous and often leads to sexual harassment. Liberal Democrats endorsed the proposals put forward by the mental health charity, *Mind*, to:

- Address the problem of sexual harassment and abuse in mental health settings including by clinical staff, by increasing inspection of institutions and introducing women-only wards.
- Expose the unfair treatment of women in mental health and the disproportionate number of women in mental institutions, by undertaking a gender audit of mental health services.

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### ***Liberal Democrats are committed to ensuring that women receive equal treatment from the NHS***

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7.3.2 We would provide encouragement to voluntary organisations for the work that they do in supporting women with mental health problems and in providing advice and counselling.

## 7.4 Maternity Services

7.4.1 One practical effect of the health reforms has been to erode seriously the ability of a woman to choose where, and in what circumstances, she gives birth. Women are not always able to go to the hospital of their choice and they can be hampered if they opt for home delivery. Liberal Democrats believe that, wherever practicable, all women should be free to choose whether to give birth in a hospital, at home or in a ‘domino scheme’ with a named midwife for each patient. Those who opt for a home birth, having consulted with doctors and midwives, must have the back up of good emergency services, such as obstetric flying squads, should further assistance and

hospitalisation be required. Counselling should be made available for problems during pregnancy and labour, and especially in the tragic circumstances of a miscarriage or the death of a baby.

## **7.5 Family Planning Services**

7.5.1 Liberal Democrats believe that the main aim of family planning services should be to enable women to make sensible and informed decisions about when, and when not, to have children, thus reducing unwanted pregnancies. We oppose the cuts inflicted on family planning services - particularly since family planning produces a net *saving* for the NHS. Liberal Democrats believe that such services should be strengthened rather than undermined.

7.5.2 Women must not be put in a position where they are dependent solely upon their own GPs to provide family planning advice, as many women prefer not to talk to their GPs about such matters. We are committed to the provision of free family planning and support services to take some forms of contraception off prescription thereby making them more easily accessible.

7.5.3 We reaffirm the decision taken by the Party earlier in this Parliament that abortion is an issue of individual conscience on which the Party takes no substantive position. We do believe, however, that whatever the law on abortion is at any one time - as determined by Parliament following a free vote of MPs and Peers - it should be consistently applied across the country.

# ***Equal Before the Law***

**8.0.1 The British legal system is failing women. The laws, as well as those who interpret them, display many out-dated attitudes to women. There are no guidelines to advise judges or magistrates on how they can ensure equal treatment of the sexes. In the case of sexual offences against women, the law is often poorly administered. The system is poorly equipped to deal with women offenders with caring responsibilities, without also punishing those for whom they care. Finally, women who are victims of domestic violence too often find a lack of support from the existing system, be it emotional, financial or legal.**

8.0.2 In order to make the legal system not only more accessible to women but also to improve the operation of justice, we would:

- Make the Ministry of Justice responsible for drawing up guidelines for judges and magistrates on equal treatment in the practice of the law.
- Improve the availability of legal aid and assess the eligibility of married couples separately (see section 8.1).
- Review the administration of the Sexual Offences Act (see section 8.2).
- Strengthen the range and availability of civil remedies for dealing with family cases, including extending the use of protection orders and orders regulating occupation of the home.
- Extend police training on equal opportunities and further encourage a multi-agency approach in cases of domestic violence.
- Support Lord Woolf's call for more use of community prisons, so long as women are entitled to choose a women-only prison.

- Increase visiting rights to children with mothers serving sentences.

## **8.1 Access to the Law**

8.1.1 Liberal Democrats believe that the poor availability of legal aid restricts women's access to justice, since women are on average less well off than men. Liberal Democrats are committed to extending the value and scope of legal aid as resources allow.

8.1.2 Liberal Democrat believe in principle that married women should be treated as independent from their spouses. Just as the Government has introduced independent taxation for couples, and just as we propose over time to do the same for benefits, we believe eligibility for legal aid should assessed on the same basis.

8.1.3 It is often argued that legal aid should also be extended to sex discrimination and equal pay hearings before Industrial Tribunals. This is because those who are represented at Tribunals are far more likely to be successful than those who are not. Liberal Democrats disagree. Making legal aid available for Tribunals would address the symptom rather than the cause of the problem.

8.1.4 Tribunals were set up to be a fast and simple means of access to justice, in which individuals would be able to represent themselves. If they are failing to meet this objective then they should be reformed; there is little point in having the Tribunal system if it is solely to mimic a court of law. The consolidation of equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation in a single Act would help to simplify the law significantly and the establishment of specialised Equality Tribunals would increase the specialist knowledge of those hearing cases (see 4.1.3). In addition, we would like to see the Human Rights Commission taking up more precedent-setting cases (see section 2.2).

## 8.2 Women and Sexual Offences

8.2.1 Great progress has been made in the treatment of women who complain of rape and other sexual offences with the provision of rape suites and specially trained officers. We welcome the recognition in the 1994 Criminal Justice Act that rape in marriage is still rape, together with the House of Lords' recent decision outlawing rape by buggery and other means of penetration.

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***The British legal system is failing women. The laws, as well as those who interpret them, display many out-dated attitudes.***

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8.2.2 Our main concern now with sexual offences legislation is the way in which it is administered. Accordingly, we propose to:

- Make it illegal for a complainant's sexual history to be raised in court. Because a woman consents to sex in one set of circumstances does not mean that she will consent in a different set of circumstances or again in the same set of circumstances. It will still be up to the prosecution to prove that consent was not given in this instance in any case.
- Investigate the wide regional discrepancies in sentencing of rapists and other sexual offenders.

We welcome the abolition, within the Criminal Justice Act, of the obligation on judges in sexual offences to instruct juries that it is dangerous to convict on uncorroborated evidence.

8.2.3 Liberal Democrats would ensure that victims were kept aware of the progress of cases. In addition, we would enable the complainant to wait during the trial in a different room from the defendant, his family or friends, and would ensure that victims were notified of their attacker's date of release. Both these measures

will improve the existing system of criminal justice and might encourage the victims of sexual assault to come forward.

8.2.4 Finally, we support a change in the law to make all sexual harassment a crime, rather than restricting the crime of harassment to the workplace as is presently the case.

## 8.3 Women and Domestic Violence

8.3.1 Domestic violence is the second most common form of violence reported to the police, making up 25% of all recorded crime. It cuts across boundaries of class and age and social background. Women often absorb a great deal of violence before reporting it to the police, through either a misguided sense of shame, fear of reprisal or distrust of the authorities. It is estimated that only 2% of violent attacks on women are reported to the police.

8.3.2 Domestic violence is a social and psychological problem which can be addressed only by fundamentally changing society's attitudes to women and children. We believe that many of the proposals in this paper would help to start that change. In the meantime, however, more needs to be done to support victims. For instance, women's refuges are over-crowded, and their funding is often insecure. As a first priority in combating domestic violence, we would aim to make money available to local authorities to provide one refuge place per 10,000 of the population, as part of a national strategy for refuge provision.

8.3.3 Domestic violence often involves a criminal offence: we see no reason why its victims should be compelled to use the civil courts if they are to have any chance of a remedy. Even those women who are strong enough to withstand the pressures of bringing litigation must find their way through the law on domestic violence, which is particularly complex in England and Wales. We believe that domestic violence should be better policed and the civil law clarified. We:

- Support the implementation of the Law Commission's recommendation to improve legal remedies for domestic violence including: the establishment of a single, clear set of civil remedies available for all courts; the introduction of protection orders against violence or molestation by anyone with a family 'connection'; protection for children involved in family proceedings; and a single flexible power to grant orders concerning the occupation of the family home.
- Allow for the greater use of mediation and alternative dispute resolution in resolving domestic disputes, including increased support for marriage guidance and other counselling services. The costs to the state of providing financial support for lone parents, together with the strain family breakdown places on children, serves to demonstrate the importance of resolving disputes amicably wherever possible.
- Make sure that the police know whether an injunction ('interdict' in Scotland) is in force when they attend domestic disputes, and encourage them to arrest whenever an offence of domestic violence has been committed.
- Improve police training to enable them to deal with such complex and highly charged situations.
- Encourage police authorities to adopt the 'best practice' of other authorities, particularly in the establishment of Domestic Violence Units.
- Encourage a multi-agency approach, so that lawyers, police, social services and women's centres work together, making women aware of the options that are open to them. Each agency should, however, retain its own identity; we do not wish to see the police attempt to become social workers.
- Raise the awareness of the criminality of domestic violence by government-funded campaigns.

8.3.4 Women who have come to Britain to marry their partners are in a particularly difficult situation. If the marriage breaks up in under a year, they can be deported. Even if they are given leave to remain, this can be on the condition that they have no recourse to public funds. Yet without housing benefit, such women's refugees as there are cannot afford to take them in. Even if they live there rent-free, they have no money for food and clothing. Deportation may mean destitution for women from some cultures. The UK partner is often aware of this fear, and exploits it through violence. We would allow access to public funds, including social security and legal aid, for all victims of domestic violence, and would not take access to public funds as a result of domestic violence into account when considering an application for leave to remain.

## 8.4 Cohabiting Couples

8.4.1 We recognise that the civil law requires constant review to keep pace with social change. In particular, cohabitation without formal marital status is now widespread, yet rarely accounted for in law. Complex legal problems relating to property rights can arise when such relationships come to an end, with one partner being left without any financial support or right to legal redress.

8.4.2 We support the Scottish Law Commission's moves to give protection to former cohabitants by enabling them to apply to a court for financial provision to be made for them, on the principle that account should be taken of any economic advantage derived by either partner from the contributions of the other. We will propose similar legislation for England and Wales after we have had the opportunity to consider the forthcoming report of the English Law Commission.

## 8.5 Women as Defendants

8.5.1 One in fourteen women born in 1943 had been convicted of an offence (excluding motoring and minor offences) by the age of 31. One in three men born in the same year had a conviction. Women's laudable record is partly explained by the greater use of cautioning for women. Forty-nine percent of women found guilty of indictable offences in 1990 were cautioned, compared to 30% of male offenders. Even when this is taken into account, however, women still only account for one in five known offenders.

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### ***Liberal Democrats are committed to increasing the number of women justices and judges***

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8.5.2 Delinquency and crime are somehow thought to be 'normal' though objectionable for boys and men, but 'abnormal' for women and girls. The women who commit offences are seen as violating the role of their sex as well as the law of the land. As a result, women are more likely to be imprisoned on remand than men; the Greater London Bail Information Scheme reports that women were twice as likely to be denied bail at their first court appearance when charged with offences involving drugs, and more than three times as likely when charged with dishonesty. Only one quarter of these groups of women were subsequently given a prison sentence, and one-fifth were acquitted. Yet recent research at HM Prison Holloway indicates that offending on bail is not a problem in relation to women defendants. We would therefore amend the 1976 Bail Act to require magistrates to bear in mind the likelihood of a defendant - male or female - receiving a custodial sentence, when deciding whether or not to grant bail.

8.5.3 Sentenced women in prison are more likely than men to have no previous convictions - in 1990 the figures were 33% of women and 11% of men. 53% of women had no more than two previous convictions, compared to 23% for men. These women were likely to have been found guilty of theft, handling, fraud, forgery and drugs

offences (67% women: 33% men) rather than violent or sexual offences (24% women: 64% men). Black female offenders get sentences which are, on average, almost two years longer than white offenders. This is largely, but not entirely, explained by the lengthy sentences given to drug couriers from Africa and South America. We believe women should be sentenced in the same way as men. Accordingly, we would:

- Increase the number of women justices and judges.
- Increase and improve the training for those who pass sentence, with particular attention paid to the prejudices against women who offend.
- Review Home Office sentencing guidelines to ensure gender neutrality.

8.5.4 A 1989 Home Office Survey found that half the jailed women interviewed had children or dependants under the age of 18, compared to a third of men. Of the twelve women's prisons, only three have facilities for babies - the upper age limit is 18 months. While 91% of fathers in prison have their children looked after by their current or former partner, only 23% of mothers can say the same. 52% of mothers in prison have at least one child being looked after by other relatives and 12% have children with foster parents or in care. There can be several changes of home and carer as arrangements made at short notice are reorganised, or when Social Services intervene with fostering arrangements. Children are not accorded special visiting rights - two visits per month is the norm, and the small number of women's prisons means that the journey is often a long one. Child visitors are generally expected to cope in the same visiting rooms as adults.

8.5.5 We would like to see the implementation of the Woolf Report which recommends the establishment of community prisons. Women prisoners must, however, be given the choice between mixed and women-only prisons since evidence suggests that a high proportion of women prisoners have been raped or sexually

abused and they suffer further abuse in mixed prisons.

8.5.6 Liberal Democrats welcome Holloway Prison's move to allow children to visit their jailed mothers for an entire day once a fortnight. We would like to see this measure extended to as many prisons as possible, and also:

- Provide practical and financial assistance, such as access to telephones at the start of a sentence to reduce the disruption to children.
- Provide visiting rights for children out of school hours.
- Ensure that appropriate toys and play areas are available at visiting times.

8.5.7 The appeals of some women convicted of murdering their violent husbands have received much attention recently. We endorse party policy to remove the mandatory life sentence for murderers, and believe that this would alleviate the pressure on the defence to make out a charge of manslaughter, where sentencing is discretionary. We do not support the introduction of a new defence, available only to women -

we believe everyone should be treated equally before the law, and that means making the same defences available for both women and men. We

would review the defences of provocation and self-defence, bearing in mind that victims of domestic violence face the prospect of repeated attacks, but are highly unlikely to reoffend.

## 8.6 Women as Prisoners' Partners

8.6.1 The 1989 Report of the Chief Inspector of Prisons recognised that imprisonment is often a punishment for both the offender and their family. In 1989, families had to find an average of £545 a year to support family members in prison. Prisoners would sometimes be moved without regard for the travel costs faced by visiting family members. We would require the Prison Service to take into account the impact of its decisions on the families of prisoners and would implement our existing policy on community prisons, which would make visiting easier and cheaper for families. (See Federal Policy Paper 22, *Justice and Security in the Community*, 1991). We would:

- Allow prisoners greater access to phones, with more privacy.
- Establish a prison leave payment for prisoners' families to help cover the costs of home leave.

# ***Power and Participation***

**9.0.1 Women are badly under-represented in the institutions and public bodies which daily affect the lives of everyone in this country. In the civil service, trade unions and quangos, in local and national government, and even in the Cabinet, women are massively outnumbered by men. Their under-representation at the most senior levels is even more significant. Until such time as women - and other under-represented groups, such as ethnic minorities and people with disabilities - fully share power and decision-making responsibilities, their needs and aspirations will continue to play second fiddle to those of men. As a result, women will fall short of recognising their potential and Britain will continue to under-perform, socially, economically and politically.**

9.0.2 In recent years, public life, and politics in particular, has become somewhat discredited. It is increasingly viewed as remote, irrelevant, and even corrupt. We believe that this will remain the case so long as public and political life continues to be dominated by a few white men drawn almost uniformly from a single social class, rather than reflecting Britain's diverse and pluralistic society. Ensuring that women are able to play their full part in political life is also, therefore, a step to revitalising our democracy.

9.0.3 The under-representation of women in public life is a result not just of direct and indirect discrimination, but also of the enormous social, cultural and economic pressures on women. Women are often indirectly excluded from participation in public life by their family and domestic responsibilities and their lack of economic independence, since institutions are arranged to suit the lifestyles of men rather than women with caring responsibilities. Women are excluded since they are rarely part of the formal and informal networks through which appointments are often made. And women often exclude themselves, lacking the confidence to put

themselves forward to take on roles which are almost universally regarded as male.

9.0.4 If women are to play a full part in public and political life then these barriers to equal participation must be lifted. Liberal Democrats would:

- Reform the UK's political system, including working practices in Westminster and Whitehall, to remove the barriers to women's involvement in politics.
- Place on the new Ministry of Justice a responsibility for ensuring that within a decade women account for at least one-third of the representation on all public bodies.
- Require that all public sector posts be advertised adequately and appointments made in accordance with equal opportunities' procedures, including ensuring that all shortlists for appointments have a reasonable gender balance.
- Begin a process of de-mystifying public life, by explaining what is involved in public posts, offering training and mentor programmes for people who wish to acquire relevant skills.

9.0.5 We will continue to promote the role of women in our own Party, constitutionally guaranteeing that they represent at least one-third of those elected to party committees and of those on shortlists for selection for Parliamentary seats.

## **9.1 Women in Westminster**

9.1.1 Women remain grossly under-represented in political life. Seventy-five years after women obtained the vote, only 167 women have ever entered the House of Commons as MPs. Currently, only 61 out of 651 MPs are women (less than 10%). There are only 79 female

members of the House of Lords, a mere 6% of the total. Women fare worse in Britain than in the Parliaments of almost every other European Country: Denmark (33%), the Netherlands (22%), Germany (20%), Spain (16%) and Luxembourg (13%). In the Cabinet today there are two women out of a total of 26 (8%). In the Government as a whole, there are 6 women out of 113 people (4%).

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***Ensuring that women are able  
to play their full part in political life  
is a vital step in  
revitalising our democracy***

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Britain's poor showing is a direct result of the electoral system used in this country, the procedures of the Houses of Parliament, the financial and time costs of standing for Parliament, and the attitudes of political parties. Liberal Democrats proposals to address these problems are set out in detail in Federal White Paper 6, *Here We Stand*, 1993. We would:

- Replace the current 'first past the post' electoral system, with a system of proportional representation which would be likely to open up new political opportunities for women.
- Reform the current working practices of the Houses of Parliament to make them less hostile to women and to family life, including reform of working hours and the provision of child care.
- Back the introduction of limited state funding for political parties which would help women meet the costs of standing for Parliament.
- Continue to promote opportunities for women within the Liberal Democrats.

9.1.2 The 'first past the post' system used for UK elections not only fails to reflect electoral support for parties, it also discriminates against women and ethnic minorities. This is because it fails to offer political parties with any incentive to promote a 'balanced' gender or racial ticket.

Consequently, power largely continues in the hands of those men who already hold power. Almost all Parliaments elected by proportional systems have better representation of women than Britain.

9.1.3 Liberal Democrats would replace first past the post with a system of proportional representation. The system currently preferred by the Party is the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system, which, by using multi-member constituencies, gives voters a choice of candidates from the same party. Thus, it encourages parties to maximise their vote by offering candidates from a broad range of backgrounds, including women and ethnic minority candidates.

9.1.4 The hours MPs work are often a major disincentive to women who might wish to stand for Parliament. Evening sittings until two or three o'clock in the morning are rarely compatible with caring or domestic responsibilities and the lack of childcare provision directly excludes many mothers. There is no reason for sittings to take place at such times. The only MPs they suit are those who want to continue practising as barristers. We reaffirm the Party's policy that votes should be scheduled at more reasonable hours of the day, and endorse current efforts to restructure parliamentary hours to accommodate MPs with family responsibilities. We would guarantee the provision of childcare facilities in the UK and national Parliaments.

9.1.5 Political participation is an expensive activity. It has been estimated that standing as a parliamentary candidate in a winnable seat costs between £10,000 and £30,000 in the years leading up to an election. It is also a very time-consuming business, taking up several evenings a week and most weekends. Few women have the time or money to stand for Parliament. We therefore support the introduction of limited state funding for political parties and for bona fide political campaigning, subject to the publication of accounts.

9.1.6 The SDP/Liberal Alliance was the first party to introduce measures to ensure that

women, as well as men, were included on Parliamentary shortlists. The Liberal Democrats' constitution requires that at least one-third of those elected to party committees and those selected for Parliamentary shortlists be women, and one-third men. As a result, the Liberal Democrats and their predecessor parties, have consistently fielded more women candidates than the other major parties. We are committed to continuing this provision and welcome the similar provisions made by the Labour Party and the Greens.

## 9.2 Women in State and Local Government

9.2.1 Liberal Democrats are committed to involving local people and communities in the decisions which affect their daily lives. We are therefore anxious to see the power of local government increased and responsibility for many of the decisions currently taken at Westminster devolved to national or regional Parliaments. Given the barriers that face women in Westminster, it is hardly surprising that many prefer to exercise influence at local, regional or national government level. Women currently constitute one quarter of all local councillors, but over a third of all Liberal Democrat councillors including a number council leaders and committee chairs. Hence, the decentralisation of decision-making opens up new opportunities for women to participate in politics. Liberal Democrats would:

- Establish home rule in Scotland and Wales and Regional Assemblies in England.
- Support a variety of practical measures to facilitate women's participation in local government, including the provision of creches and nurseries as well as single sex training for women in areas where they are traditionally under-represented.

## 9.3 Women in the Civil Service

9.3.1 Employment patterns within the civil service are important to women's participation in public life, because so much of policy development is initiated here. In 1984, the Civil Service launched a programme of action to *Achieve Equality of Opportunity for Women in the Civil Service*. The programme put in place a number of practical measures - career breaks of up to five years without loss of seniority, flexible working patterns and part-time work for all grades and increased childcare provision - which provide a model for other areas of public life.

9.3.2 There is still, however, a long way to go. Since 1984, the proportion of women at the top of the Civil Service has grown from 4%, but is still only 9% as compared with 60% in the lower level administrative grades. Women account for just 3% of top science, engineering and technology posts. The Civil Service has set a 15% benchmark for senior posts to be held by women by the year 2000. Liberal Democrats support the civil services' initiatives to promote equal opportunities, but would like to see programme extended further. The equal opportunities unit of the Ministry of Justice would be responsible for overseeing and developing the programme.

## 9.4 Women in the Voluntary Sector

9.4.1 The UK has a very active and often influential voluntary sector with women making an important contribution, whether as chief executives of major charities or as driving forces behind small community groups. A 1991 survey of voluntary activity suggested that 53% of current volunteers are women, with a particular emphasis in the fields of health, social welfare and children's education. The voluntary sector would collapse without the wealth of experience, skill and time devoted to it by women.

9.4.2 The Government has exploited the goodwill of the many women who work in the voluntary sector. For instance, it acknowledges

the central role of the voluntary sector in providing community care, but failed to take note of the views of voluntary organisation workers when devising its care in the community programme. We believe that the Government must work in partnership with the voluntary sector, providing support and encouragement for this vital work.

## 9.5 Women in the Media

9.5.1 Overwhelmingly, the media is dominated by men. In broadcasting, for example, of 203 directors only 23 are women; 88% of BBC executives and 76% of BBC senior producers and middle managers are men, while, by contrast, 89% of production assistants are women. Not surprisingly, given these figures, political news often excludes areas which are of particular concern to the lives of women. In the 1992 General Election for example there was little mention of childcare or child benefit, equal pay, pensions or maternity rights, but there was a great deal about taxation of high earners, who are predominately male. Of 1,031 interviews with politicians conducted on the main news programmes during the election, only 36 were with women and of these 28 were with Margaret Thatcher.

9.5.2 The media has an important role to play in opinion forming and promoting attitudes towards the sexes. The media gender gap must therefore be closed as a matter of urgency. We call upon the broadcasting industry to monitor and report on a regular basis on the role of women within the media, and to implement equal opportunities policies to enable women in the industry to compete on an equal basis with men.

## 9.6 Women and Public Appointments

9.6.1 In 1986, women held 19% of public appointments; by 1993, this figure had risen to 28%. In 1993, 40% of all new appointments were of women. The Public Appointments Unit in the Cabinet Office has been at the forefront of promoting woman for public positions, but is still used by too few government and official bodies for their recruitment. Women comprise 34% of the list of candidates available for appointments held by the Cabinet Office, which has achieved a 47% annual rate of appointments actually made. The more important and best paid positions are still, however, overwhelmingly going to men and a number of important government departments are still failing to appoint women, including a appointment rate of only 22% in employment and 12% in transport. Liberal Democrats would:

- Set a target that women should constitute at least one-third of government appointees to public bodies within a decade.
- Require that fifty percent of those persons appearing on shortlists for public appointments should be women.
- Require that all vacant posts be adequately advertised and appointments made according to equal opportunities procedures laid down by the Ministry of Justice.
- Require all government departments to consult the Public Appointments Unit when making appointments, and to report annually on the gender balance of those appointments.

*This Paper has been approved for debate by the Federal Conference by the Federal Policy Committee under the terms of Article 5.4 of the Federal Constitution. Within the policy-making procedure of the Liberal Democrats, the Federal Party determines the policy of the Party in those areas which might reasonably be expected to fall within the remit of federal institutions in the context of a federal United Kingdom. The Party in England, the Scottish Liberal Democrats and the Welsh Liberal Democrats determine the policy of the Party in all other areas, except that any or all of them may confer this power upon the Federal Party in any specified area or areas. If approved by Conference, this paper will form the policy of the Federal Party.*

*Many of the policy papers published by the Liberal Democrats imply modifications to existing government public expenditure priorities. We recognise that it may not be possible to achieve all these proposals in the lifetime of one Parliament. We intend to publish a costings programme, setting out our priorities across all policy areas, closer to the next general election.*

#### Working Group on the Equal Treatment of Women

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