

Liberal Democrats Policy Consultation

Women's Policy

Consultation Paper 93



This consultation paper is presented as the first stage in the development of Party policy for women. It does not represent agreed Party policy. It is designed to stimulate debate and discussion within the Party and outside; based on the responses generated and on the deliberations of the working group a full Women's policy paper will be drawn up and presented to Conference for debate.

The paper has been drawn up by a working group appointed by the Federal Policy Committee and chaired by Jo Swinson MP. Members of the group are prepared to speak on the paper to outside bodies and to discussion meetings organised within the Party.

Comments on the paper, and requests for speakers, should be addressed to: Jo Swinson MP, Women's Policy Working Group, Policy and Research Unit, Liberal Democrats, 4 Cowley Street, London SW1P 3NB. Email: n.rai@libdems.org.uk

Comments should reach us as soon as possible and in any event no later than 30th March 2009.

Federal Policy Consultation Paper No. 93

© January 2009

*Published by the Policy and Research Unit, Liberal Democrats, 4 Cowley Street, London SW1P 3NB.
Layout and Design by Helen Banks*

ISBN: 978-1-85187-795-9

Printed by Contract Printing, 1 St James Road, St James Industrial Estate, Corby, NN18 8AL

Printed on 100% Recycled Paper

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Summary

There has been a revolution in some aspects of women's lives over the past 30 years, however the reality is that there are still many issues whose impact on women's lives is vastly disproportionate to those of men.

This document and the questions posed in it explore the issues which hold women back in their everyday lives and which create barriers to every person in the UK living their life to the full extent of its possibilities.

In responding, please do not feel that you need to answer all the questions – just pick out the sections or individual points which interest you, or tell us which issues you think we've missed out!

Introduction

1.1 There has been a revolution in some aspects of women's lives over the past 30 years. Many people may therefore ask why the Liberal Democrats are producing policy dedicated to women's issues. As a party, we commit to pursuing a fair, free and open society, where inequality, discrimination and prejudice in any form are not tolerated. Unfortunately the reality is that there are still many issues whose impact on women's lives is vastly disproportionate to those of men.

1.2 The next few pages will explore the issues which hold women back in their everyday lives and which create barriers to every person in the UK living their life to the full extent of its possibilities.

“I can have it all”

2.1 With increasing numbers of women entering the job market, more women entering Parliament and big businesses gaining more female executives, society is definitely changing. Whilst things may be changing slowly at the top, the reality for many women on lower incomes is often very different. Women hold the majority of low-wage jobs and will often be juggling several working commitments.

2.2 Whilst beliefs about the roles of men and women in society have changed dramatically, the reality in the home has not kept pace: four in ten women have liberal views about the role of men and women but a traditional division of labour in their own home. This group are the most likely to clash with their partners about housework and also find their home life more stressful.¹ The trend towards women having equal access to employment and an active role in society, exacerbated by the entrenched ideas about traditional home roles, has made women's lives increasingly stressful, as many struggle to balance careers, with motherhood, shopping, cleaning and caring for their family.

2.3 “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”²: this is reflected in the contemporary distinction between ‘sex’ as the biological differences between men and women, and ‘gender’ as the socially constructed differences. Challenging gender roles and stereotypes and their construction today is important to freedom for both men and women.

Questions

1. *Where does gender stereotyping come from and what is gender about?*
2. *Can government encourage changes to how we think about gender inside and outside the home?*
3. *Can women really 'have it all'? Can men? What is 'it' anyway and is it worth the effort?*

¹ http://www.natcen.ac.uk/natcen/pages/news_and_media_docs/BSA_24_report.pdf

² Simone de Beauvoir

Money

3.1 Despite sustained attempts to close the gap, there is still a difference between the pay received by men and women for doing the same job. Currently, this pay gap is running at 17.2%³ on an internationally comparable measure – although the lowest since records began, this difference is clearly not acceptable. Part time work is currently up to 36% less well paid per hour for women compared to men, with 42% of women in employment working part time, compared with around 10% of men.⁴

3.2 We acknowledge that the average woman is currently significantly worse off than the average man in terms of both private and state pension provision. Our existing pensions policy, *Action to Improve Life for Older People* (March 2005) sets out our plans for a Citizens Pension.

3.3 Compared to men, women are less likely to be in debt, but are more likely to have problems with any debt they do have and are far more likely to use sub-prime credit forms. Over-indebtedness disproportionately affects women; as lone-parents, carers, low-paid workers and those with fluctuating working patterns.⁵ Transition periods in women's lives often leave them vulnerable to debt, for example relationship breakdown, change of employment circumstances or a new child.

3.4 Divorce or separation is a traumatic time for both parties, and statistics show that women often go on to experience a great deal of challenges as a result of such transition. In addition, there is little legal protection for the increasing number of couples who choose not to marry at all, leaving both men and women vulnerable. This legal black hole is exacerbated by the continuing incorrect belief that there is such a thing as 'common law marriage' which gives cohabitants the same rights as married couples.⁶

Questions

4. *How can/should the government act to tackle a) the gender pay gap, b) the pensions gap, c) the inequalities caused by part-time working?*
5. *What advice should be made available publicly (e.g. through schools, FE/HE institutions, the Citizens' Advice Bureau) to assist individuals in managing their finances and understanding the support systems available?*
6. *How can we make sure that women are better informed about their rights and legal position in a relationship? Are there any legislative changes you would make to clarify the position between unmarried co-habitants? For those who don't feel comfortable with marriage, should the option of civil partnerships be extended to mixed-sex couples?*

³ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=167>

⁴ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/elmr/02_07/downloads/ELMR02_07Walling.pdf

⁵ Department of Trade and Industry, *Over-indebtedness in Britain*, Elaine Kempson, 2002

⁶ British Attitudes Survey January 2008.

Sex

4.1 Our society has become increasingly sexualised and such sexualisation has become more mainstream; it has started to permeate through to younger audiences. There have been studies undertaken into the effects of such images on the development and identity of young women – and the development of young men's attitudes towards girls – and numerous calls for media and advertising sources to cease the portrayal of women as sex objects and instead concentrate on promoting strong and confident female role models.⁷

4.2 The UK has one of the lowest rates of conviction for rape – fewer than 6% of all reported cases in 2007 resulted in a successful conviction.⁸ There is evidence that many jurors continue to believe the myths of sexual assault – that women and girls are 'asking for it' if they wear particular clothes, are out late, or have been drinking. Liberal Democrats want to shatter such myths.

4.3 The sex industry remains part of life in the UK – not just for those who work in the industry or its customers, but for the public in general through their exposure to pornographic material on newsagent shelves, in the windows of adult shops and on the internet. A 2005 review⁹ found that half of all children have logged on to a pornography website, whilst over 57% of children aged 9-19 had seen pornography online. There is a debate about whether pornography degrades men and women, and the effect it has on more mainstream ideas about sexuality and sexual expression.

4.4 The latest British Attitudes Survey indicated that the UK is becoming increasingly liberal in its approach to relationships and sexuality. We believe that every individual in the UK should be free to express their sexuality and choose their relationships without fear of oppression or discrimination.

Questions

7. *How does the increasing sexualisation of mainstream culture affect our lives and freedoms? How might we mitigate any negative affects of this?*
8. *How can we ensure that children and young people grow up with strong, confident and successful female role models? Is there anything that can be done to make the impact of the media and advertising industries more positive?*
9. *How can we better protect all members of our society from sexual abuse, both within their domestic environment and in their community?*
10. *What can be done to decrease the prevalence of sexual attacks and improve conviction rates for those guilty of rape?*

⁷ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/6376421.stm>

⁸ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime-victims/reducing-crime/sexual-offences/>

⁹ LSE, Ofcom, NCH and ESRC

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11. *How can we change attitudes to sex so that rape and sexual assault – under any circumstances – is not tolerated by society at large? How could this affect sex education amongst children and young people?*
12. *How can we best support individuals to express their sexuality freely; eliminating oppression, fear of oppression and social stigma?*
13. *Should a women's paper be tackling the issue of prostitution and how might it approach the issues?*

Relationships and Love

5.1 Relationships with others provide security and companionship, often helping us through our most difficult times; however, for many people, relationships are often the cause of some of the most traumatic experiences too.

5.2 Our society is changing: the most recent statistics indicate that both divorce and marriage rates are at 25-year highs and all-time lows respectively. Non-traditional families and relationships are becoming the norm, with new social and caring networks surrounding them.

5.3 The divorce process is an incredibly fraught time, through which we believe individuals should be supported and assisted not just by friends and family, but by the legal system, the state and other institutions (such as banks, government agencies, etc).

5.4 The value of unpaid support that carers provide reached £87 billion in 2007 – more than the 2006-7 NHS spend. The burden of caring falls more on women than men, with a higher percentage of women caring than men and for more hours per week.¹⁰

Questions

14. *Can the government better support and assist non-traditional forms of relationships?*
15. *Should there be any taxation or legal provisions for individuals such as partners, siblings, or parents and children who co-habit for long periods of time but are not legally married or in a civil relationship?*
16. *How should young people be educated about relationships, sex, STIs, and growing up? What role might schools and parents have in this?*
17. *How can social links be re-kindled in our society? Does the government have any role to play in this or does it fall to voluntary organisations?*
18. *How can we generate social networks for those who do not naturally have them?*
19. *How can we support carers in the valuable work that they undertake for our society? What actions could the government take to better recognise and support carers' role?*

¹⁰ [http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Time%20spent%20caring\(1\).pdf](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Time%20spent%20caring(1).pdf)

Body Image and Health

6.1 There is evidence that media portrayals of the 'perfect' female aesthetic is a driver in eating disorders and psychological problems, however as a society we must take responsibility for the part we play in fuelling this industry – the popularity of magazines carrying commentaries on the physical appearance of celebrities leaves us in no doubt that there is an appetite for such critiques of the female aesthetic.

6.2 Fewer women take the recommended amount of exercise than men (at just over 21% versus 34%), putting them in greater danger of health risks in the future. By the age of 15, only 36% of girls are engaged in regular physical activity, compared to 71% of boys, whilst among 16-24-year-olds, twice as many young women as young men are seriously obese.¹¹ With rising obesity levels and highly sedentary activities dominating our everyday lives, there is an urgent need for women particularly to be enthused into taking up new sports and more active lives.

6.3 Good sexual health is very important but an issue of which many women remain largely ignorant. The incidence of sexually transmitted disease has been rising in the UK in recent years, particularly among young people, indicating that there is clearly much education which remains to be achieved on this topic.

6.4 A 2007 Healthcare Commission study showed that maternity services in the UK were of widely variable standards, with some women having extremely poor experiences of pregnancy, birth and ante-natal care.¹² In addition, there are problems caused by the central government drive for 'efficiency', as maternity units around the country are closed and patients diverted to larger centres which are usually further away. Women are often turned away from hospitals, even when in labour and attending their pre-planned, pre-booked hospital of choice, and this is largely as a result of staff shortages.¹³ We believe that women and their families should have a choice about where they give birth, including the choice for a birth in a local hospital, a home birth or a birth in a midwife-led maternity unit.

6.5 Our policies on maternity pay and childcare provision are currently under review by a separate group and are presented for conference's deliberation in *The Best Start in Life*.

Questions

20. *How can we encourage women to have a more healthy body image? What role could the media and advertising play in generating this change of attitude?*
21. *How can we as society rebalance our ideas about female physical 'perfection' and challenge current trends in critiquing the female aesthetic? How can we ensure that models are healthy and maintain a healthy body weight?*
22. *How can we make sport more attractive and appealing to women? How can this be achieved at school to give an early positive relationship with sport?*

¹¹ <http://www.ywca-gb.org.uk/docs/Obesitybriefing.pdf>

¹² http://www.healthcarecommission.org.uk/db/documents/Towards_better_births_200807221338.pdf

¹³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/mar/21/health.nhs>

23. *Are there any incentives that could be used to encourage individuals to get healthy and active?*
24. *How successful have the government's awareness programmes and campaigns on sexual health been? Are there any improvements which could be made to increase awareness?*
25. *How can we get the message about STIs across to all young people, making the most of new technologies and innovation?*

Men

7.1 There can be no discussion of women's issues without reference to the role which men play in women's lives – it is in comparison with men that women judge their equality and women's lives are shared with men in work, friendship and home environments.

7.2 Men are as important as women in the lives of their children and should be encouraged and enabled as much as possible to play an active role, including after relationship breakdown between adults.

7.3 Part of the process of bringing about equality between the sexes is changing social attitudes about gender and breaking down the barriers between 'traditional' areas of dominance. Whilst we have focused on getting women into male-dominated spheres, it is equally important that men have access to areas which have traditionally been 'female' – stay-at-home dads, male nurses, male primary school teachers, and male nursery assistants all have an immensely important role to play. Men may be equally weighed down by the UK's traditions, and would welcome social acceptability for them to stay at home with their children or take on 'traditionally female' work.

Questions

26. *How can we encourage men to take a greater role in their children's lives? What role do educational establishments, the health service and other public organisations have to play in this?*
27. *How can we ensure that, after divorce or separation, fathers are encouraged and enabled to maintain a role in their children's lives?*
28. *How can we remove traditional male values from our society so that both men and women can be truly equal in all regards?*

Career

8.1 Recently, the head of the new equality watchdog warned that the extension of maternity leave may be sabotaging women's careers, with some employers thinking twice about offering jobs or promotion. This 'unintended consequence' of the focus on maternity leave has raised more complications in the attempt to close the career gap.

8.2 The 'glass-ceiling' is still very much in evidence in the UK today, as a mere 4% of executive directors and only 20% of MPs are women.¹⁴ Whilst girls outperform boys at school, by the time women leave education a gap has already developed in the pay they receive for their work.¹⁵ Contrary to the widely held view that childbirth and time out of the workplace for other reasons are the major explanation for the gender pay gap, recent research has shown that within 3 years of leaving university, women are paid on average £1,000 less per year.

8.3 A key aspect of promoting equality for women is to ensure that each individual is able to make the choices which are most appropriate for them, including the choice about how to raise their family. To encourage flexibility and real choice, access to well paid part-time working is an important element.

Questions

29. *How can we ensure that equality legislation does not adversely impact on women's chances of employment or promotion? What role could shared parental leave play in the solution?*
30. *How can we create pathways back into work after a child break? Should parents be 'forced' back into work by the welfare system?*
31. *How can we best enable mature women to get back into the labour market after a long break?*
32. *How can we enable parents to spend the time they want to with their children? How do today's working norms affect parent-child quality time?*
33. *How can we encourage more women, particularly those from non-white backgrounds, to put themselves forwards for the 'top' positions in our society – MPs, senior barristers, executive directors and the top echelon of positions in business.*
34. *How can we encourage more girls to do traditionally 'male' subjects at school? How can we encourage boys to do traditionally 'female' subjects?*
35. *Do working class women face particular challenges in terms of achievement, promotion and opportunities available to their peers?*

¹⁴ <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/representation%20-%20April%202006.doc>

¹⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/nov/06/gender.highereducation>

Feeling Safe

9.1 Although young men are more at risk of crime than women, women still express the most fear about being a victim of crime. This is partially due to the targeting of sexual offences against women – some 45% of women will be a victim of domestic violence, sexual victimisation or stalking at least once in their lifetime – but also due to other factors such as poor design of public spaces and inappropriate manning of late-night public transport services. It is essential that everyone in our society should feel confident in going about the activities they choose without fear.

9.2 While women represent only 5% of the prison population, the number of women held in custody in England and Wales has rocketed in recent years. It is forecasted that the number of women in custody could rise a further 20% by 2014.¹⁶ Women prisoners are more likely to be guilty of theft and fraud, and less likely to be involved in crimes of violence or criminal damage than men.

9.3 The majority of women in prison have complex needs such as drug addiction, self-harming and mental ill health. Women prisoners often have short sentences, dependent children, and high levels of social exclusion. Women's prisons are also spread far and wide, and few women are located close to their home or family.

9.4 The Corston report criticised the criminal justice system for dealing with women in the way that is most convenient, rather than the way which helps them regain control over their lives. The report focused on the need for diversion methods and the need for those who are at risk – in terms of offending, drug abuse, mental health and other concerns – to be supported.

9.5 Although the report recommended detention in smaller centres, the Government announcement of 3 new 'Titan Prisons' clearly demonstrates a move in the opposite direction.

Questions

36. *How can we achieve a safe environment on our streets and how can we enable individuals to feel safe? Is there anything particular which could impact on women's perception of public safety?*
37. *How should the criminal justice system be reformed to better address the specific needs and challenges of the female population it serves? What alternatives to prison might be appropriate for female offenders?*
38. *How can we ensure that all offenders receive assistance with mental, emotional and drug problems which is appropriate to their needs?*
39. *What can the government do to turn lives around in the criminal justice system, reducing re-offending and rehabilitating people back into mainstream society? Are there any particular examples of successful innovation in this area?*

¹⁶ Ministry of Justice 2007

40. How can we make the face of the criminal justice system more female, by encouraging more women into the police force and the top jobs within the legal profession?