

Labour Women's Network – Replies to Questions

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to set out my views. As the NEC vice-chair for women I have worked with LWN on assessing applications for the Jo Cox leadership programme, and as members of the NEC equalities committee, and if re-elected I hope to continue co-operation on behalf of all women in the party and the movement.

As a general comment it is not possible for one out of 39 NEC members to ensure that anything happens, so my answers should be taken as what I would like to do, rather than what I can promise to achieve. Please contact me on annblack50@btinternet.com to discuss any of these further.

1) Yes I will continue to defend the principle and implementation of all-women shortlists. I support changing the law to extend AWS to other elected positions. Actually I think the law already allows AWS in selecting council candidates? – Labour is certainly using them.

For most parliamentary and council positions, AWS for some seats are balanced by open selections in others. That isn't as easy for standalone directly-elected mayors or police and crime commissioners. For PCCs, more men than women have the necessary background and experience and this, combined with the requirement to live in the electoral area, has made it impossible even to shortlist any women in some recent selections. However if the legal framework is changed the party can then work on enabling more women to come forward.

2) Yes I will try. My preferred approach would be to avoid removing incumbent male MPs when constituencies are merged or disappear, but to use AWS in enough seats where a Labour MP is standing down to maintain or improve current levels of women's representation. I would also seek to apply this within regions and nations, not just across the 631 seats as a whole.

3) Yes I will continue pushing for this.

4) The question assumes that a culture of sexism is universal, which may be a little unfair, but my experience suggests that it is still too widespread. Responsibility for tackling it lies at every level. At the grassroots all members, regardless of gender, should act in accordance with party standards, and call out behaviour which falls short. Where this fails, members may be able to raise complaints with their constituency officers or executive committee. Where the officers / EC are part of the problem, the aggrieved member should be able to contact someone in authority, at regional or national level, who will suggest ways to tackle the problems. This may involve informal mediation to establish acceptable behaviour in future or, if necessary, support with formal proceedings.

None of this is easy, because party staff are very thinly spread, and in the end the situation has to be resolved locally, with the people directly involved. I would also want to extend these principles to all kinds of bad behaviour, online or offline, whether sexist or bullying, offensive or rude on other grounds, or aimed at an individual at a personal level.

5) I know that members do not entirely trust existing procedures for complaining about sexual harassment. There may be scope for increasing the element of independence. However when it gets to the final outcome, I do not think that someone entirely outside the party should decide who remains or does not remain a member, and what sanctions are applied. (NB If the perpetrator is convicted of a criminal offence they would automatically be expelled, so these decisions would be over lesser charges.)

In this context, the party commissioned Karon Monaghan QC to investigate all these issues. However the NEC is not allowed to read her report. While respecting the confidentiality of those who gave evidence to her – and I was one of them – I am pressing for the NEC to see at least the recommendations, and I would take her advice very seriously in deciding my settled position.

6) Again I cannot single-handedly ensure this. I would argue for as much openness as possible, but the trade unions who represent party staff should also be consulted. I'd have to check, but I think that statistics on pay cannot be broken down to a level where individual named employees can be identified.

7) There are already requirements for at least 50% women among local party officers, on regional boards, on delegations to conference and other bodies, on the NEC and on the national policy forum, usually within each section and not just across the committee as a whole. If used effectively, women have the opportunity to be heard. I support the development of women's forums at local level, and would like to remove the over-bureaucratic requirements which make them difficult and expensive to establish and operate.

As NEC vice-chair for women I steered the annual women's conference towards formal decision-making, with motions at this year's conference and a separate free-standing women's conference in 2019. This needed a lot of preparatory work which fortunately was well advanced before the 2017 general election was called. Separate regional and national women's committees are under discussion in the party democracy review: I am in favour if they are effective ways of dealing with the culture of sexism at the grassroots (see 4) but not if they are just extra meetings.

8) Where I have any influence then yes I would oppose advertising all-male panels. I am not sure what is meant by "gendered language" – certainly "he", "chairman" etc are not acceptable terms, nor any assumptions that particular roles are occupied by men (or by women). If it means replacing "men" and "women" by non-binary terms then it would take a while to filter through to local parties and indeed to public use, and language is still evolving in this area.

9) Yes. I was a member of Harriet Harman's working group in 2012 which looked at options for ensuring at least one woman in the leadership team. We adjourned without resolution because all proposed options had drawbacks, to my lasting regret because at that time changes would not have been seen as designed to benefit any individual or faction. Personally I think the best alternative is two deputy leaders plus a leader, with at least one of the three being a woman, but am happy to discuss other ideas.

10) Yes, and with the support of local government representatives on the NEC I think we're pushing at an open door. I would like to include adoption leave, which may be "baby leave" but would cover older children as well.

Ann Black
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