

LWN Positive Action FAQs

Labour Women's Network strongly supports the use of positive action measures, including All Women Shortlists, as a means of improving the unacceptably poor levels of women's representation in public life at all levels.

What are the figures for the representation of women now?

Across all parties, women are:

- 33% of Members of the Westminster Parliament (MPs)
- 24% of the Cabinet
- 35% of Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs)
- 45% of Members of the Welsh Assembly (AMs)
- 32% of councillors
- 18% of council leaders
- 18% of Police and Crime Commissioners
- 25% of directly-elected local authority mayors
- 0% of metro mayors.¹

What are the figures of the representation of Labour women?

Overall, they are much better. For Labour, women are:

- 45% of MPs
- 50% of the Shadow Cabinet
- 48% of MSPs
- 52% of AMs
- 45% of councillors
- 23% of council leaders
- 27% of directly-elected local authority mayors
- 11% of Police and Crime Commissioners
- 0% of metro mayors.

¹ The Mayor of North Tyneside, Norma Redfearn (Lab) is the acting chair of the new North of Tyne Combined Authority, which will appoint an Interim Mayor in December 2018 and elect a Mayor in May 2019.

Positive action measures, including All Women Shortlists, are used for all selections except Police and Crime Commissioners, directly-elected local authority mayors and metro mayors. Council leaders are elected by Labour Council Groups.

Why does this matter?

51% of the population are women; to exclude their presence and voices from any level of elected office is not only unjust, but also wasteful and politically damaging.

Labour is best served by having a strong and diverse body of representatives. We are most likely to win when we field a team which reflects voters and can connect with them.

Better representation of women amongst our candidates not only delivers opportunity for individual women, but also makes Labour more likely to be a winning team.

In an ideal world, candidates would be selected on merit alone, and we would not need to use AWS. Unfortunately, all the evidence is that we do not have a level playing field, and, if we truly believe in equality, we need to do something proactive to even things up.

What is positive action?

Positive action is any measure which levels up the playing field for women. It can take a number of different forms, including All Women Shortlists (AWS), twinned constituencies where one selects a man and one a woman, and (where elections use proportional representation [PR]) making sure that women candidates are highly ranked in electoral lists.

Experience shows that AWS is the most effective way of delivering gender equality in our one member, first past the post parliamentary electoral system. In Scotland and Wales, where PR is used, other methods may be appropriate.

Internationally, almost all of the countries with high levels of women legislators use some form of positive action or quota system. Countries like the USA, Russia and Japan, which don't use positive action, lag well behind.

Is positive action legal?

Yes. Positive action for some elections was first made legal in the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act (2002), and this was reconfirmed in the Equality Act (2010). It has been used by the Labour Party for all Parliamentary, Local and European elections since. However, the law does not cover elections for Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) or directly elected Mayors, and the difference this makes can be seen in the figures quoted earlier.

LWN wants the rules for PCCs and directly elected Mayoral elections brought into line with those for all other elections, but this will take legislation (by a Labour government).

Don't positive action and AWS mean that we select less able candidates?

No. In fact, most people cannot say whether women MPs were selected from AWS or not, and women MPs are never introduced on current affairs programmes as 'X who was selected from a controversial all-women shortlist'.

Women selected using AWS work at senior levels, and do so very effectively. Shadow Cabinet members Emily Thornberry, Angela Rayner, Rebecca Long-Bailey, Sue Hayman, Cat Smith, Valerie Vaz, Christina Rees, Barbara Keeley and Nia Griffith were all selected using AWS. Other high-profile AWS women MPs include Chi Onwurah, Gloria de Piero, Paula Sherriff, Stella Creasy, Rachel Maskell, Jess Phillips, Tulip Siddiq, Holly Lynch, Heidi Alexander, Rupa Huq, Melanie Onn, Luciana Berger, Thangam Debbonnaire, Maria Eagle, Angela Smith, Lilian Greenwood, Kerry McCarthy, Rachel Reeves, Shabana Mahmood and Lisa Nandy, as well as many other successful Labour women. They have undoubtedly strengthened both our Party and Parliament.

Some people object to AWS on the grounds that they think it is demeaning to women, or that women selected by this method will always be thought of as second class. As can be seen from this list, however, this is simply not true.

What about other excluded groups?

We agree that we need to make sure that our public representatives generally are much more diverse in terms of race, class, sexuality, disability and many other characteristics. This is true of men as well as women.

LWN runs leadership courses for those of its members who are considering seeking selection as parliamentary candidates, and monitors the diversity of participants.

As a result, we know that they are drawn from very varied backgrounds; between 2010 and 2015 81% were state educated, 70% were from outside London, and only 15% worked in politics or related fields.

What else do we need to do?

Positive action generally, and AWS in particular, are by far the most effective measures when it comes to rectifying the democratic deficit in terms of gender, but it needs to be used as part of a range of initiatives to develop a more varied body of public representatives overall. This needs to include training, mentoring, access funding and cultural change as well as action by government and all political parties, as well as Labour and LWN.

Research in both the UK and around the world, however, has shown that without positive action these measures are much less effective, and that even after 50:50 representation has been achieved some form of positive action needs to be retained for a time to stop it slipping backwards.

What do we need to do next?

If the Labour Party continues to use AWS in the way that it has done since the 2002 Act, we will be the first major political party in the UK to achieve 50% women MPs at Westminster.

Without AWS we could easily go backwards, as we did in 2001 when AWS was not used after the great increase achieved in 1997.

Now we need to make sure that we keep moving forwards, and that positive action is extended to those areas not covered by current legislation. This particularly applies to PCC and Mayoral elections, where women are still seriously under-represented. However, to do this we will need a Labour government and legislative change, and for this reason we want Labour's next manifesto to:

- a) Change the law so that positive action, including but not limited to AWS, can be used for all elected offices, including Mayors and Police and Crime Commissioners and any new publicly elected posts in future.
- b) Remove all other legislative barriers to the continued use of positive action by political parties.

LWN will continue to back positive action as the most effective way of ensuring fair representation for women. We will continue to back that up with training, development and support for women wanting to go into public life.

We believe that Labour is the only Party which takes women's representation seriously, and we are proud to be part of that success.

For more information go to <http://www.lwn.org.uk/iheartAWS>.