

All-Women Shortlists

Labour Women's Network strongly supports the use of All Women Shortlists as a means to improve the unacceptably poor levels of women's representation in the Westminster Parliament, and of positive action measures generally to increase women's presence at all levels.

With 119 Labour women MPs, 45% of the Parliamentary Labour Party are women and Labour still has more women MPs than all the other Parties put together. However, only 32% of MPs across all parties are women.

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.

Why AWS?

Experience shows that AWS is the most effective way of delivering gender equality in our one member, first past the post parliamentary electoral system. 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 and Russia, which use no affirmative action at all for women in Congress, lag well behind.

Doesn't AWS mean less able women?

No. Women selected using AWS work at senior levels, and do so very effectively. Shadow Cabinet members Angela Rayner, Rebecca Long-Bailey, Sue Hayman, Cat Smith, Valerie Vaz, Chi Onwurah, Angela Smith, Christina Rees, Barbara Keeley and Nia Griffith were all selected using AWS. Other high profile AWS women MPs include 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, 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. The fact is, however, that most people cannot say which method MPs were selected by, and women MPs are never introduced on current affairs programmes as 'X who was selected from a controversial all-women shortlist'.

In all, the great majority of Labour's women MPs were selected using AWS.

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.

LWN runs Aspiring Candidates 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% from outside London, and only 15% worked in politics or related fields.

AWS is by far the most effective measure 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. LWN will continue to play a full part in promoting this.

What do we need to do next?

If the Labour Party continues to use AWS in the way that it has done for the last 4 elections we will be the first major political party in the UK to achieve 50% women MPs.

Without AWS we could easily go backwards, as we did in 2001 when AWS was not used.

LWN will continue to back AWS as the most effective way of ensuring fair representation for women in the Westminster Parliament. 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.

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