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# EQUAL FOOTING

**WHY WE CANNOT AFFORD  
TO IGNORE INEQUALITY**

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## WHY WE CANNOT AFFORD TO IGNORE INEQUALITY

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# INTRODUCTION

Success is not achieved by pushing the most vulnerable down, but by pulling everyone up. This truism has always been critical to our country's values of tolerance and fair mindedness. Survey evidence indicates that Britons overwhelmingly believe that everyone should have a fair shot at life, regardless of which part of the country they come from and who their parents are.<sup>1</sup> In that sense, our country is a self-made nation.

However, the realisation of that level playing field has required persistent political action and consistent political will, from Barbara Castle's Equal Pay Act to Harriet Harman's Equality Act; from civil partnerships to the repeal of Section 28; and from the legalisation of abortion to the Race Relations Act.

If Labour wins the next election, I will become the UK's first ever Secretary of State for Women and Equalities. That means having a politician at the top table, dedicated to advocating for equality and making sure fairness is embedded in every facet of government policymaking. If Labour is given that chance to serve, my job will be to ensure that a future Labour

government acts consistently to remove barriers to ambition and success for everyone. This is not only because public opinion strongly supports such action – but also because we simply cannot afford as a country to do otherwise.

In February 2023, Keir Starmer announced that his first mission for Britain would be to “secure the highest sustained growth in the G7 – with good jobs and productivity growth in every part of the country making everyone, not just a few, better off”. After 13 years of stagnant growth, the UK has fallen well behind many of our traditional economic competitors. To truly get Britain building again, we will need to harness the talent, creativity and brilliance of every community, with people from all backgrounds and corners of our country engaged in this national mission.

It is clear that the political right can never achieve this. Increasingly, they have adopted a ‘zero sum’ approach to equality – arguing that if barriers are pulled down for one group of people, this can only come about by making everyone else's lives harder; and suggesting that politics should

focus on stoking division, rather than on opening up opportunity.

This pamphlet sets out why they are wrong, and why delivering on equality is increasingly fundamental for achieving sustainable growth. In practice, removing barriers to opportunity adds to our economy, rather than taking away: it adds up, rather than zeroing down.

The UK was previously often viewed as a leader in promoting equality – yet as this pamphlet explains, that reputation has been substantially diminished over recent years. At a rhetorical level, the Conservative government has never been more focused on equalities issues – but purely in order to pit different groups against each other. In reality, delivery on combating inequality

has become increasingly ineffective and weak.

Yet there has never been a clearer body of evidence available that equality and economic success go hand in hand. Placing equality at the heart of policymaking and delivering pro-equality policies would support economic growth and deliver fairness at the same time. Sadly, over recent years we have not only seen an indifference to inequality, but a determination to underscore areas of ideological difference in the heat of political combat. Rather than benefiting from the light of data and experience, we have felt the heat of divisive rhetoric. A different approach is not only possible, but economically imperative. This pamphlet sets out why and how.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE UK'S REPUTATION ON ADVANCING EQUALITY

### **THE UK COMPARED WITH OTHER NATIONS**

When it comes to advancing equality, the UK was previously a country from which other nations drew policy inspiration. The 1965 and 1976 Race Relations Acts, 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, 1970 Equal Pay Act and 2010 Equality Act all drew international interest. These changes, and others, have been associated with significant improvements in the living standards of ethnic and racial minorities<sup>2</sup> and women.

Some of the legacy of these measures persists. Our instinctive tolerance, codified in legislation like the Equality Act, is often praised internationally. And surveys suggest that there is comparatively high understanding in the UK amongst Black, Asian and ethnic minority people of the existence of equality legislation and equality watchdogs; less underemployment of ethnic minority people in the UK compared with many other European countries; and lower (but still too high) levels of perceived

racial discrimination than in most other European nations.<sup>3</sup>

There are of course challenges when it comes to comparing the UK's progress or otherwise on equalities with that in other countries. The context for equalities policy in other nations is often very different to that in the UK. Many comparable nations have written constitutions, which enshrine equality, in different formulations, into the basis for the state.

In Belgium's constitution, for example, article 10 proclaims that Belgians are "equal before the law" with equality "between women and men ... guaranteed" and article 11 states that "enjoyment of the rights and freedoms recognized for Belgians must be provided without discrimination." In Greece, the same "equality before the law" is spelled out within the constitution, with the addition that while men and women have equal rights, they also have 'equal obligations', and that all "persons living within the Greek territory shall enjoy

full protection of their life, honour and liberty irrespective of nationality, race or language and of religious or political beliefs. Exceptions shall be permitted only in cases provided by international law”.

Equalities councils in different countries also have a variety of degrees of independence from government, with, for example, the Slovakian council being explicitly a government body and chaired by the Minister of Justice; Norway’s Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombudsman reporting to the Ministry of Culture; the Irish human rights and equality commission being explicitly independent and reporting to the parliament rather than the government; and other nations having one individual in post specifically to promote equality, such as the Estonian Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner.

Ministerial representation for equalities issues also varies across nations. Within the EU, over half of countries’ ministries for gender equality also cover other issues, such as employment, social security or policies towards families.<sup>4</sup> Luxembourg proclaims that it is unique in the EU for possessing a ministry solely focused on gender equality. In Ireland there is a Department for Disability, Children, Equality, Integration and Youth, and in Spain, a Ministry for Equality covering all the forms of inequality covered by the UK’s Equality Act. In France, the title of the ministry for equality has varied over time dependent on the status and role of the responsible minister, from the Secretary of State for

the Status of Women to the Minister Delegate in charge of the Family and the Status of Women, to Minister Delegate in charge of Women’s Rights, to Minister Delegate in charge of Parity and Professional Equality, and finally to Minister Delegate in charge of Equality between Women and Men, Diversity and Equal Opportunities.

Finally, in some countries responsibility is vested in an ‘ombudsperson’ for ‘equal opportunities’ (Lithuania) or an ‘ombudsman’ for equal treatment (Greece). Similarly, in many comparable nations the approach to equality overall appears to be heavily shaped by the presence of a significant minority which has been historically subject to discrimination, such as the Roma in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Spain and Portugal; Travellers in Ireland;<sup>5</sup> and Aboriginal people and ‘New Australians’ from South East Asia in Australia. Relatedly, it can be difficult to make comparisons on equalities issues given linguistic and cultural differences. This is a particular issue when it comes to the field of policies relating to disabled people. It is relatively unlikely, for example, that there were proportionately over twice as many disabled people in Latvia and Malta as in Sweden, yet that is what government statistics for these countries from 2020 would suggest.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, the UK’s reputation as close to the front of the pack on equalities issues has substantially diminished over recent years. Comparative analyses now tend to eulogise progress in countries like Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Finland rather than the UK. Portugal,

for example, has reported positive outcomes on improving housing for LGBT+ people and in relation to other indicators on LGBT+ equality. It has strong commitments in place to improve accessibility and labour market outcomes for disabled people (with one of the lowest disability employment gaps in Europe). It also has some of the lowest rates of harassment and discrimination against Black people within the EU. Spain has retained separate bodies for tackling gender-based and race and ethnicity-based inequality and, as with Portugal, requires every government Department to include a section focused on tackling women's inequality. Sweden's level of consultation with its equalities bodies is high, and its Equality Ombudsman covers a broad range of equalities issues. Overall, the European Institute for Gender Equality ranks Sweden, along with Finland, among the highest EU countries on aggregate equality measures.

Arguably, some comparisons can be overblown. Malta is often, for example, described as a frontrunner on LGBT+ equality, having banned conversion therapy in 2016 as well as undertaken other pro-equality measures,<sup>7</sup> yet its population is similar in size to that of Sheffield, and areas like HIV prevention and access to medication still need to be improved.<sup>8</sup> The three frontrunners mentioned by ILGA for LGBT+ rights, Malta, Belgium and Denmark, have all undertaken significantly less work in the area of the bodily integrity of intersex people compared with action for same-sex couples. Despite these complexities,

however, the UK is now far less likely to be singled out as an equalities frontrunner. And in some areas where there had been considerable progress, as in women's healthcare up to 2010, recent developments suggest not only stasis, but at least in some cases, regression.

In many OECD countries today, life expectancy continues to increase for women, while in the UK it has come to a standstill. In summary, the idea of the UK tending to lead has suffered considerable damage over the last few years, with recent developments challenging our previously strong reputation.

### **A LACK OF DELIVERY**

The available indicators of inequality in our country are startling.

Fifty-three years after Labour's Equal Pay Act, the gender pay gap has now actually *increased* for a second year in a row, confounding expectations that a slow and steady reduction in the gap would be most likely. More women, old and young, are dropping out of the labour market than before, for a variety of reasons including the impact of the pandemic on women's working patterns, unaffordable childcare and healthcare problems such as lack of support with menopause at work. There has been an explosion in insecure work, with zero-hour contracts and fire and rehire particularly impacting the lowest paid workers, especially Black, Asian and ethnic minority workers. There are more children, especially Black and working-class children, growing up in poverty, and more disabled people struggling to make ends



meet. For the first time in decades, life expectancy is going backwards within some communities in our country. As mentioned, the number of women dying in childbirth is rising, and Black women are four times more likely to lose their lives giving birth than white women.<sup>9</sup> Disturbingly, Black children are currently three times more likely to die in infancy than white children, their rates of infant mortality having increased over recent times, rather than continuing to fall as was previously the norm.<sup>10</sup> And the extent of hate crime has increased over time, with violent hate crime also increasing as a proportion of overall hate crime reports.<sup>11</sup>

Faced with such worrying developments, any government would surely focus on what it could do to tackle inequality. Yet we've seen huge turbulence over recent years, suggesting that for the Conservatives, equalities matters are at best an afterthought, and at worst, a chance to pit different groups against each other. While inequalities affecting all protected groups have increased, the Conservatives have all but wound down the Government Equalities Office, turning it into a unit which primarily spends its time generating headlines aimed at stoking cultural conflicts.

As the bluster bandwagons have rumbled on, the institutional machinery for promoting equality has been systematically run down. The current home for coordinating decision-making and delivery on equalities issues is the Equality Hub, based within the Cabinet Office. The Government Equalities Office is located within the Hub, and

is the lead department on women's and LGBT+ issues as well as the sponsoring department for the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). The EHRC is a non-departmental arms-length public body which was established in 2007 to bring together the promotion and enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation for different equalities strands. The Equality Hub also houses the Disability Unit, Race Disparity Unit and Social Mobility Commission.

Every element of this institutional architecture has been subject to reductions in support and inconsistent staffing over recent years. Yet stability and predictability in this area is clearly fundamental to achieving change, with expert personnel being a 'precondition for effective institutional mechanisms and progress, clear measure and commitment', according to the European Institute for Gender Equality.<sup>12</sup>

This organisational turbulence relates to the fact that successive governments have failed to provide a stable and consistent approach to the organisation of equalities policymaking. Currently, the Minister for Women and Equalities, Kemi Badenoch MP, has overarching responsibility for equality and anti-discrimination policy in the UK while also serving as the Secretary of State for International Trade – as such, her home department is different to that of the Government Equalities Office. Indeed, increasingly over recent years, the responsibility for oversight of the government's equalities agenda has been dumped in the lap of someone

who holds another major departmental role like Foreign Secretary, Trade Secretary or Business Secretary. In one of the many surreal developments of the ill-starred Truss interregnum, the role was actually briefly held by a man, who at one point was apparently no longer responsible even for policies relating to women.

Competing pressures from managing two areas of policy delivery at the same time have meant the current occupant of the women and equalities brief has struggled to attend women and equalities questions in the House of Commons – failing to fulfil the most basic duty of a minister of the Crown by being present to answer questions from MPs.

Similarly, since 2010, the Government Equalities Office has also found itself tossed around in the tempest of governmental turmoil. Successive prime ministers have shoehorned its remit into whatever other policy portfolio the women and equalities minister was also tasked with.

Arguably this ministerial merry-go-round has led to the downgrading of many equalities initiatives. For example, a taskforce on the national scandal of maternal mortality failed to meet for a whole nine months; a ban on conversion practices for LGBT+ people was promised five years ago but has still not been delivered; and many of the recommendations on criminal justice in the Lammy review were first committed to and then abandoned.

Today, the Government Equalities

Office has just two flagship programmes for women: the first an initiative to get new mothers back into science, technology, engineering and mathematics jobs that has yet to get off the ground despite being launched twice in two years; the second, a pay transparency pilot which has been quietly sidelined and will no longer be a standalone programme. This forms part of a restructure that will also see the removal of several senior experts.

The tireless officials trying to make a difference are not to blame for the failure of the last 13 years. It has been both cause and consequence of a siloing of equalities within government, far from the ambitions of Harriet Harman's Equality Act which looked to 'mainstream' equalities across government via, among other things, the public sector equality duty. Above all, what has been missing is a focus on evidence rather than divisive rhetoric, and the political will to make a difference.

### **POLARISED RHETORIC**

Over the last 13 years there has been more and more rhetorical focus on equalities – more argument about what is 'woke' and what is 'anti-woke' – but less and less action to tackle inequality, as barriers to opportunity have grown for many in Britain. While the ethnicity employment gap and hate crime targeting LGBT+ people have increased dramatically, the deputy chair of the Conservative party, Lee Anderson, has openly said he thinks the next election should be fought on 'a mix of culture wars and trans debate.' It is a sad reflection

of just how little in the way of positive vision the government now has to offer the British people.

The reason for Anderson's interest appears to be the opportunity to stoke division, rather than set out solutions. Arguments about the boundaries between sex and gender-based rights now rank among the fiercest in politics. Both sides argue – rightly – that they advocate for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. This should encourage a degree of care from responsible politicians. Responsible politicians would understand that this is not a debate to exploit; instead, it concerns people's lives. Responsible politicians would put that well beyond electoral opportunism. But this is a different and desperate Tory party.

Their current approach to the Equality Act is a case in point. Thirteen years after Labour passed that landmark legislation, it is still protecting people in countless ways every day. The legal framework it provides against discrimination by employers, businesses, schools, public bodies and other institutions is one that many other countries still lack and look to learn from.

This was a legislative achievement that cemented our country's reputation as a beacon of equality at the time, and of which Labour is still rightly proud. Perhaps this is why Conservative ministers have started to take aim at the Equality Act with increasing regularity. From criticising the definition of protected characteristics to describing the Act itself as a 'Trojan horse', what started out as a few political pot shots

is in danger of becoming a creeping barrage, with worrying consequences for the future of equality in the UK.

Yet at the same time, the prime minister has cast himself as a defender of the Equality Act, and stated during his leadership campaign that he backs the protections it contains for women born as women – even though these protections have already been enshrined in law for 13 years and Labour has been clear we will protect them. Once again, this is not about the evidence, but about pushing rhetoric that only seeks to stoke division and weaken the overwhelming consensus view that is in favour of building a fairer, more equal Britain for everyone.

Another example comes from the worrying area of hate crime. Some UK politicians on the political right have rhetorically claimed that a focus on countering hate crime has diverted police from tackling violent crime. Yet amongst the surge in all hate crimes we see a substantial increase in violent hate crimes as well. These are not two opposing phenomena but two sides of the same coin: of hatred, violence and, too often, impunity. Labour is determined to make Britain's streets safe again by halving all serious violent crime, and by raising confidence in the police and criminal justice system to its highest levels. If we are fortunate enough to form the next government, we also plan to tackle hate crime targeted at disabled and LGBT+ people specifically, by making these hate crimes aggravated offences as per the Law Commission's recommendation in 2021.

For people like Michael Stone, subject to a homophobic attack near his home this summer, justice is essential.

A final example comes from the shocking inequalities in health outcomes in our country. It took the Covid-19 pandemic to expose the extent of this crisis. My friend and colleague Baroness Doreen Lawrence wrote a vital report on the disproportionate and devastating impact of the pandemic on Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities. The Conservatives acknowledged such concerns by setting up a Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities in 2020, but then they endorsed its report when it quibbled over the legacy of the slave trade and denied the existence of structural racism. Meanwhile, Black, Asian and ethnic minority people continued to die and lose their jobs in disproportionate numbers. Labour's approach to these

inequalities couldn't be more different: in response to Baroness Lawrence's highly regarded report, one of Keir Starmer's first legislative commitments in opposition was to promise a new Race Equality Act.

Overall, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Conservatives' commitment to equality extends only as far as they can use equalities issues to stoke political division. But the suggestion that the British public is at 'war' on cultural issues misrepresents the reality, where there are often different perspectives on equalities challenges but with the public generally wanting these to be discussed respectfully rather than having two camps shouting at each other.<sup>13</sup> Treating equalities issues as political footballs is therefore contrary to public opinion, even as it is undertaken for cynical political motives.

# CHAPTER 2

## WHY EQUALITY IS FUNDAMENTAL FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH

This cynical approach to equality is particularly surprising given the emerging consensus, based on the evidence, that removing barriers to opportunity is critical to face up to arguably the UK's biggest challenge – our low levels of economic growth.

Over recent years, a substantial amount of research has been undertaken into the relationship between greater equality and economic growth. Most of these studies have considered how **reducing employment participation gaps between different groups could boost economic output**, either through increasing employment or increasing hours, or a combination of both. Even amongst comparatively high performers on gender equality, there are still many gains to be won.<sup>14</sup>

UN Women,<sup>15</sup> for example, has shown how OECD countries could boost their GDP by over \$6tn if they all matched Sweden's comparatively high female employment rate.

On average, rich countries are said to be losing some 15 per cent of their potential GDP due to women's under-employment. The OECD has drilled down into the positive economic impact of increases in female employment in the Nordic countries, suggesting that in Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, between 0.25 and 0.4 per cent of average annual GDP per capita growth over the last four to five decades can be accounted for by increases in female employment.<sup>16</sup> And the International Labour Organisation calculated in 2017 that the tax revenue that would result from closing the female participation gap could amount to almost \$1.4tn.<sup>17</sup>

The UK is particularly interesting in this regard, as labour market participation by women between 50 and 64 has actually gone down over recent years, rather than following the previous upward trend. An estimated £7bn of additional economic output could be released to the UK economy if the 185,000 women of this cohort

who have left work returned to the labour market.<sup>18</sup>

Similar findings transpire from an examination of the barriers to Black, Asian and ethnic minority people in the UK economy. Figures indicate that closing the employment gap that Black, Asian and minority ethnic people face could add almost £36bn to our economy.<sup>19</sup>

The positive economic impact of achieving greater equality is even higher if the slower rates of career progression for many groups are taken into account. The McGregor-Smith review,<sup>20</sup> for example, estimated that when progression is taken into account, as well as participation, closing the employment gap for Black and minority ethnic people could add 1.3 per cent of GDP, amounting back then to £24bn.

Many of these studies envisage economic gains based purely on the salaries that these ‘new workers’ plus ‘new worker hours’ would bring – generally calculating this as a multiple of the average salary of the existing workforce. But other research has considered another factor beyond examining the impact of this additional quantum of economic input: the **quality of that input**.

Looking at gender equality, Woetzel et al’s ‘global model’<sup>21</sup> therefore examines participation, hours worked *and* the extent to which women work in high productivity sectors compared with their male counterparts – thus incorporating an examination of ‘**occupational segregation**’. They consider that identical participation of women with men in the workplace – employment

rates, hours worked and sectoral representation – could add as much as \$28tn to annual global GDP in 2025, an increase of 25 per cent in economic output compared to continuing with the current unequal situation. Around half of the increase is accounted for by a greater female employment rate, a quarter by increased hours being worked by women and the final quarter by reduced occupational segregation.

Accepting that delivering such a radical change across the globe would be unlikely, they also calculate the impact of countries in each region ‘catching up’ to the level of the best country in the region for women’s working equality. In Western Europe, that would mean every country reducing its labour participation gap by 1.5 per cent a year – which is what happened in Spain between 2003 and 2013, the strongest regional example of change. Even this more bounded increase in female economic participation would lead to a boost to the world economy of \$12tn in 2025.

Other studies have considered the costs of racial as well as gender inequality for the labour market and examined the economic benefits of higher levels of inclusion. Hsieh et al note that, whereas in 1960, 94 per cent of doctors and lawyers in the US were white men, that had fallen to 62 per cent by 2010.<sup>22</sup> As they contend, the change indicates that many innately talented women and Black men were unable to move into employment that reflected their potential skill sets – in economic terms, the allocation of talent was highly inefficient. They calculate that

between a fifth and two fifths of the increase in aggregate market output that has taken place in the US between 1960 and 2010 can be accounted for by this ‘improved allocation of talent’. Cook et al link blocks on talent to lower-than-necessary levels of innovation,<sup>23</sup> suggesting that greater access to jobs in STEM subjects and elsewhere would have allowed a greater throughput of ideas, inventions and patents. For Cuberes and Teignier, these blocks are particularly evident when it comes to entrepreneurial talent,<sup>24</sup> which is critical for creating the new businesses and products of the future.

A variety of studies have also considered how greater equality leads to **improved economic productivity**. Petersson et al showed how labour productivity growth was correlated with increased female labour force participation, by examining developments in different Canadian regions.<sup>25</sup> Ostry et al seek to explain some of the link by considering how what they call ‘gender complementarity’ can increase productivity and thus lead to an increase in wages, including male wages – with greater inclusion of women in the workplace adding to productivity by providing a complementarity of skills and approaches compared to the average male worker.<sup>26</sup> While they accept that reducing the ratio of capital to labour can also arise when the total labour supply increases (as it would do with higher female labour force participation), this potential trend tends to be outweighed by the increased productivity and thus higher wages due to gender complementarity.<sup>27</sup>

Maceira’s analysis cements this view, by showing how for most EU countries, greater gender equality can lead to greater female employment in sectors with existing skills shortages, which will then **increase employment overall**. Indeed, she estimates that of the 10.5m additional jobs that could be created were gender equality to be improved, 70 per cent would be taken by women, but also, by implication, 30 per cent by men.<sup>28</sup> At a whole-economy level, the IMF has suggested that greater gender equality is linked with a greater diversity in the variety of goods that countries produce and export,<sup>29</sup> which in turn can increase competitiveness, and therefore improve economies’ resilience to external shocks.

Yet more studies have linked the economic boost from greater equality to the **characteristics of more diverse workplaces and teams** in general. Rock and Grant note that more homogeneous teams tend to be more prone to groupthink and less likely to challenge assumptions.<sup>30</sup> The McGregor-Smith review argued that increased racial diversity in businesses was linked to benefits including improved recruitment and employee engagement, better teams and improved understanding of customer wants and needs.<sup>31</sup> Over a number of years, McKinsey have attempted to quantify some of the positive impact of diversity in companies’ leadership teams on **company profitability**. Interestingly, they have found that an existing, positive relationship between diversity and above-average profitability has

increased rather than diminished over time – such that the “most diverse companies are now more likely than ever to outperform less diverse peers on profitability.”<sup>32</sup> Companies which are in the top quarter when it comes to the representation of women on executive teams were 25 per cent more likely to have above-average profitability than those in the bottom quarter. The relationship is even stronger in terms of ethnicity, with teams in the top quarter for ethnic representation outperforming the bottom quarter by 36 per cent in profitability. (Although they do note, in this edition of their research, that executive-level inclusion does not necessarily

translate into every aspect of inclusion being positive throughout high performing companies). The analysis described above could be viewed as focused overwhelmingly on employment, with little connection to other aspects of inequality – but many authors have underlined the interconnection between prejudice and discrimination in society and economic outcomes. While tackling barriers in the workplace is clearly fundamental to achieving change,<sup>33</sup> a whole variety of policy areas, from healthcare to criminal justice, need to be considered in relation to how they impact on employment levels and the types of economic factors detailed above.<sup>34</sup>



# CHAPTER 3

## SETTING THINGS RIGHT

Pro-equality interventions tend to be relatively simple, and inexpensive or even cost free. There are some areas of policy rightly described as ‘wicked problems’<sup>35</sup> – where the impact of public policies can be unpredictable, where success is dependent on sustained action over very long periods of time, and where international factors can blow progress off course. Yet when it comes to advancing equality, the problem generally is not wicked – it is wilful. Many of the policy tools are already in the government’s hands, if only ministers would use them. To realise greater equality often requires a simple recipe: a modest portion of evidence about what works, either from our own history or from other countries, with a dollop of political will on top.

Perhaps the clearest lesson from comparative analyses is that tackling inequality requires champions with sufficient structural power in government to deliver change. Labour’s commitment to a Shadow Secretary of State (rather than just minister) for Women and Equalities

would enable this, as would restoring the cross-government function of the Government Equalities Office.

Moving from these structural issues to concrete policies, a number of practical measures can help to unlock the gains from removing barriers to economic participation and progress. A particular priority in the UK, given the previously-mentioned drop-off in older womens’ participation in the labour market, should be addressing these barriers for women from 45 onwards. Requiring larger companies with more than 250 employees to produce menopause action plans, and providing guidelines for small companies, would focus corporate leaderships on supporting their older female workforce. With one in 10 women from 45 to 64 purportedly having left their job due to menopausal symptoms, this approach could realise significant economic gains.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, given that the UK’s gender pay gap has increased for the last two years, with an above-average widening of the gap in a number of UK

regions, action here is clearly needed.<sup>37</sup> Baroness Frances O’Grady’s review into the gender pay gap will seek to identify the drivers of these persistent and growing gaps. These would also be easier to tackle if comparisons across employers were enabled, and if there were greater flexibility available for all employees (including agency and outsourced workers, as set out in the Labour party’s New Deal for Working People).

Ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting would also help ensure that affected groups are paid fairly, while also encouraging greater efficiency in pay systems for all employees. Labour’s Race Equality Act will introduce ethnicity pay gap reporting and other measures to tackle structural racial inequality. This would ensure workplaces are fit for the future by building on the positive experience of employers, including the Labour party itself, in instituting ethnicity pay gap reporting systems. In the same vein, unnecessary barriers in the job market for disabled people could be removed by enabling the passporting of Access to Work between jobs. This would give disabled people the confidence that they would not have to apply time and again for the support that they need.

A recognition of the fact that the current parental leave system is failing is also critical. PwC have estimated that employers could save up to £260m a year with an improved system which encourages fathers to take more leave, as a result of reduced recruitment costs and turnover.<sup>38</sup> The exact details of any such system would need to be carefully

examined and Labour has committed to a review of parental leave.

Yet more economic potential could be unlocked by looking beyond employed workers and recognising the enormous gaps in access to entrepreneurship. The 2021 Start-Up Scale-Up review commissioned by Labour examined how these barriers to opportunity and new businesses could be overcome, including for currently underrepresented groups.

Another area of unnecessary economic loss comes from the impact on retention and progression of working environments where sexual harassment is tolerated. Sadly, surveys suggest that sexual harassment at work is still widespread in the UK, with one in two women and seven out of ten LGBT+ workers having experienced it.<sup>39</sup> This is where government action can really make a difference. A recent study of sexual harassment policy in almost 200 countries showed the benefits to women’s economic outcomes that come from the introduction of laws and policies prohibiting sexual harassment at work. They include boosting participation in the labour force and improving pay for women. Employers can and should do more here to create and maintain workplaces and working conditions free from harassment – including by third parties such as customers and service users – and they would reap the benefits in improved retention, not to mention the clear moral argument for action.

The epidemic of hate crime and violence against women and girls represents the confluence of the moral

and ethical failures of perpetrators and the failure of the government to take preventative action. It costs our country dearly. The economic cost of violence against women and girls has been calculated as £66bn, with many working hours lost every year due to the impact of domestic violence, for example.<sup>40</sup> Here a whole-of-government approach is needed, including the introduction of specialist rape courts, domestic abuse specialists in every 999 control room, and a variety of other targeted measures. At the same time, the playing field must be levelled for hate crimes against LGBT+ and disabled people, so that they can also be better protected against these crimes, which can have an awful impact on victims' mental health. Classifying all such offences as 'aggravated' would bring them into line with how other forms of hate crime are treated.

Finally, it is notable that one-fifth of the 185,000 women aged 45 to 64 who have left the labour market are on an NHS waiting list. There are huge disparities in access to and outcomes from healthcare, including racial and ethnic disparities in maternal and infant mortality, in services for LGBT+ people and for people with learning and other disabilities. Ensuring that our NHS is fit

for the future, including by tackling these disparities and improving women's health outcomes, will in some cases unlock the potential that is lost by incapacitation.

Labour's national health mission will tackle health inequalities, taking account of the specific and intersectional disparities facing women, Black, Asian and minority ethnic people, disabled people and LGBT+ people so that everyone can access treatment without risk of discrimination. We will ensure that the government and public sector are working to close gaps in access to care, delayed or mistaken diagnosis and language barriers, and as part of our commitment to introduce a new Race Equality Act that tackles structural racial inequalities, we will introduce reforms to care including a new target to close the Black maternal health gap. Labour will also oversee one of the biggest NHS workforce expansions in history, which will help cut the huge waiting lists for specialist care faced especially by women, Black, Asian and minority ethnic people, disabled people and LGBT+ people and will allow us to incentivise continuity of care in maternity services by restoring relevant targets when staffing levels allow.

# CONCLUSION

The political right appears to be fixated with talking about equalities issues – but, it seems, only ever in a way that pits different groups against each other. This pamphlet has set out how this approach has damaged the UK’s reputation and, above all, held back our economic potential.

The evidence base indicating the link between pro-equality policies and economic dynamism and growth could not be clearer. Tackling inequality rarely involves pulling resources away from one group just to give them to another. Instead, it tends to require opening up opportunity for all. In this way, pro-equality policies are not zero-sum; they are about adding to the economic pie, not cutting slices out of it.

For many, the moral arguments for equality are overwhelming. How, ethically speaking, can such a huge amount of human potential go unrealised, with all the accompanying negative impacts on individuals’ wellbeing? Faced with the Tories’ divisive approach, however, it is important to be clear, as this pamphlet has been, that the benefits of equality do not only accrue to those who suffer from its absence. Instead, they result in a stronger and more sustainable economy for us all.

The real question to be asked, therefore, is not whether a future Labour government *should* focus on eliminating inequality.

Instead, the question we must ask is whether our country can *afford for us not to do so*.

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# EQUAL FOOTING

ANNELIESE DODDS MP

The UK used to be seen as a leader in promoting equality but in recent years that reputation has diminished. Too often different groups are pitted against each other, while policies to combat inequality are increasingly weak and ineffective.

In this pamphlet, Anneliese Dodds MP, the shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, argues that delivering on equality is fundamental for achieving sustainable growth. Removing barriers to opportunity adds to our economy, rather than taking away: it adds up, rather than zeroing down.

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