FABIAN SOCIETY

FABIAN WOMEN

# NO TIME TO LOSE

## SIX WAYS TO TACKLE GENDER INEQUALITY

Edited by Georgie Nel, Iggy Wood and Miles Ward

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# Acknowledgements

Thanks to all our colleagues at the Fabian Society. A special thank you to Christine Megson, the cofounder and coordinator of the Fabian Women's Network mentoring scheme.


# About the editors

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# FOREWORD

Eleven years ago, I saw an advert in the Guardian for the Fabian Women's Network mentoring programme. There is no doubt that getting onto the programme changed my life. At the time, I was working in the charity sector on food and farming. Today, I am an MP. I can only describe it as a nought-to-60 political career boost – a network, an education and unwavering personal support.

The programme has been running for 14 years. Cohort 13 was the first group to have Labour in power. I asked them to produce their own policy or campaign ideas to highlight areas in need of more gender equality. The ideas were presented to me during the cohort's workshop day in parliament. The results were phenomenal. Each idea had a unique depth and context, and many were rooted in the mentees' own lived experience of gender-based abuse.

I hope you find them as informing and engaging as I did.

**Disclaimer:** The essays presented are solely the views and expressions of their respective authors. They form part of an evidence-gathering and listening exercise, and do not necessarily reflect the views of any affiliated organisation or facilitator.

*Catherine Fookes is a parliamentary private secretary to the prime minister and the Labour MP for Monmouthshire.*

# 1. HOW DOES ANYONE AFFORD CHILDREN?

Eve McQuillan / Stella McAteer

Britain's system of parental leave is a product of a different era – one where caregiving was largely seen as the preserve of mothers. The welfare state was built with the unwritten assumption that women would provide care, unpaid, to children and older relatives. Since then, family life, gender roles, and work patterns have shifted dramatically. Yet reform to the social and legal institutions of care has been piecemeal and ineffective. Today, it is increasingly clear that the UK's parental leave policies are not just outdated; they are actively undermining gender equality and economic resilience.

Our gender pay gap remains stubbornly resistant to change. The Fawcett Society's research reveals that the UK's gender pay gap was 11.3 per cent in 2024, up from 10.7 per cent the previous year.[1] This was primarily caused by the greater time women spent out of the workforce and women shouldering more of the responsibility for unpaid care. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reveals that unpaid primary child-care givers, generally mothers, experience an average pay penalty of £1,263 per month (over £15,000 per year), reaching £1,785 per month (over £21,000 per year) after six years of providing unpaid care.[2] These figures demonstrate how the current system punishes 'default parents', who continue to face financial penalties as the years pass.

According to the Women's Budget Group, the cumulative impact is that women miss out on almost £100bn a year in income because of barriers to paid work. Research from 2019 found that women's pensions were, on average, 33 per cent smaller than men's due to time out of the workforce.[3] Even women who have no intention of having children are disadvantaged because of assumptions about who takes parental leave. A poll by the Young Women's Trust and YouGov revealed that 10 per cent of HR managers

[1] Fawcett Society, Equal Pay Day 2024

[2] Jitendra, A, Woodruff, L, and Thompson, S, The Caring Penalty, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023

[3] Wilkinson, L, Adams, J, The Underpensioned: Defining the gender pay gap, PPI, 2024

admit that they would be reluctant to hire a young woman for fear she would go on parental leave.

This government – and indeed, any progressive government to come – must embrace a bold reimagining of parental leave. At its core should be a recognition of care as shared, vital labour; the need to support small employers and self-employed parents; and the social and economic benefits of early bonding between children and all caregivers. It must understand the positive economic value of investing in parental leave – both for keeping parents within the labour market, and to ensure that people can afford to have children.

We propose that the UK progresses towards a system of parental leave that has three key principles at its core: a liveable income for all new parents, ring-fenced leave for new fathers and non-birthing parents and targeted support for small businesses. The UK must look to Spain, which has instituted a programme that is both popular and effective. Now is not the time for piecemeal change. We must create a system of parental leave that serves families as they are today, not as they were in the past.

## Liveable statutory parental leave pay

Current statutory maternity leave arrangements offer six weeks pay at 90 per cent of average weekly earnings, followed by 33 weeks of £187.18. This is simply not liveable. At a minimum, the rate should be raised to one commensurate with the minimum wage for a full-time earner.

Some employers do go beyond statutory requirements and offer occupational maternity pay. However, research from the Maternity Alliance reveals that only 13 per cent of mothers have access to such pay. The vast majority rely on statutory contributions, or if they are ineligible, maternity allowance, which offers £187.18 for 39 weeks.

It is simply unacceptable for new parents to be expected to live on this income. Of course, the inbuilt assumption is that a husband will provide financially; this is simply out of touch with our society. A survey by Maternity Action reported that 17 per cent of new mothers struggled 'a lot' financially, and 55 per cent borrowed money to support themselves during maternity leave.

## Closing the gap: progress towards a genuinely equal model

The UK offers a meagre two weeks of paternity leave, paid at just £187.18 per week or 90 per cent of your average weekly earnings, whichever is

lower. It is little wonder that many fathers and other non-birthing parents simply cannot afford to take it. Take-up remains stubbornly low, hovering around 25 per cent.

Previous attempts to equalise parental leave provision – chiefly through the introduction of shared parental leave – have foundered. Just 3 per cent of families have used shared parental leave since its introduction in 2014. This is unsurprising. The system is complex and unwieldy, and statutory leave entitlements are low, meaning that families are left reliant on discretionary payments from employers. There are shoots of good practice wherein companies have chosen to ensure that all parents, regardless of whether they have given birth, have access to this leave. The norm, however, remains that only mothers have access to such payments.

By contrast, Spain has taken decisive action. As of 2021, Spain offers both mothers and fathers 16 weeks of paid parental leave, on equal terms. Each parent is entitled to their own leave, paid at 100 per cent of their salary, and crucially, the entitlement is non-transferable. The reforms have led to a surge in uptake by fathers – from just 56 per cent in 2016 to nearly universal take-up today. Early evidence suggests positive effects on child development, parental wellbeing, and greater gender equality in the division of care.

Spain's success demonstrates that when parental leave is available to fathers it is extremely popular. Whilst Spain enables fathers to be more active parents, the UK model keeps gendered expectations in place. The campaign for better paternal leave, The Dad Shift, notes that the gender pay gap in countries with paternity leave of more than six weeks is an average of 4 percentage points smaller. The workforce participation gap is an average of 3.7 points smaller. They also argue that more paternity leave leads to better bonding between fathers and their children, and improves children's wellbeing and attainment at school.

The UK should look closely at the Spanish model. At a minimum, the government should introduce 16 weeks paid leave for new fathers and non-birthing parents. As in Spain's model, this leave should be "use it or lose it" – a non-transferable right to reinforce that both parents are equal caregivers. This early time is not only vital for bonding and supporting maternal recovery, but for embedding gender equality at home and in the workplace.

Without serious reform, the current system continues to reinforce the idea that care is a woman's responsibility alone – an idea that contributes to the motherhood penalty and the persistent gender pay gap. Paid leave for second parents is one of the most direct and effective tools to change that story.

Scandinavian countries stand out in terms of parental leave provision. In Sweden, parents can access 480 days of paid leave for each child, of which 240 days are paid at a high rate and can be shared between parents, and 90 days are reserved for each parent. Such a model would be hugely beneficial for parents and families in the UK. We recognise, however, that Sweden and other Nordic countries have a very different social contract to the UK, and a different economic model.

## Supporting the self-employed

Our economy is changing. Nearly 5 million people in the UK are self-employed—around 15 per cent of the workforce. Yet self-employed parents are largely excluded from meaningful parental leave support. While mothers can claim maternity allowance, it is only £187.18 a week, and there is no financial support for new fathers. For many freelancers and sole traders, the choice to start a family means weeks or months of lost income with no safety net.

We propose a new parental allowance for the self-employed: a universal, income-based grant available to any parent not eligible for statutory maternity or paternity pay. Modelled on existing income support systems including universal credit and the SEISS grants used during the Covid-19 pandemic, this allowance would be calculated based on recent earnings, up to a reasonable cap, and could be claimed by either parent.

Such a scheme would reflect the realities of today's workforce and ensure that parental support is not a privilege reserved for those in full-time employment. It would also be a vital step towards rebalancing the relationship between care and work across different economic models—helping to make self-employment a more viable and family-friendly option.

## Easing the burden on small businesses

Parental leave should not come at the expense of economic survival – either for families or for the small businesses that employ them. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) make up 99.9 per cent of UK businesses and employ over 60 per cent of the private sector workforce. Many struggle with the cost, administrative burden, and staffing disruption of covering parental leave.

We propose the creation of a parental leave resilience fund – a government-backed programme to provide direct financial support to small businesses facing temporary staff absences due to parental leave. This could take the form of grant payments, wage subsidies for temporary cover, or assistance with recruitment and training. In return, employers would commit to upholding best practice in family-friendly employment policies.

This targeted intervention would alleviate the pressure on small employers, encourage positive attitudes toward parental leave, and reduce the hidden discrimination that often arises when small teams are stretched too thin. It would also create a level playing field, ensuring that family-friendly policy is not a luxury that only large corporations can afford to offer.

This would sit alongside the existing provision whereby SMEs are able to claim back statutory payments from HMRC. Businesses would be encouraged to expand occupational parental leave policies for all employees, regardless of whether they are the mother of the child.

## Informed choices

In addition to the above measures, businesses should be required to publicise their parental leave policies, enabling job applicants can make informed choices without jeopardising their chances at interview.

## A vision for the future

The choice to have children has wide-reaching social benefits. The costs, however, are primarily borne by parents – as the UK's falling birthrate is testament to. We need to see urgent action to ensure that parenting does not become the preserve of the wealthy.

With UK productivity dwindling 20 per cent behind that of France, there's a clear need for policies that support parents to work. Encouraging more equitable sharing of care is one of the best ways to remove barriers to work for women. The changes we suggest would bring the UK into line with much of Europe, where better-paid, better-designed parental leave is seen as a basic component of civic life. We should not be satisfied with lagging behind other European economies.

More importantly, they would reshape our expectations of parenthood and work. They would affirm that caring is not a private matter, but a public good. They would give all families the tools to thrive, regardless of how they are formed or where their income comes from. It is time we built a parental leave system fit for purpose. One that treats all parents—mothers, fathers, the self-employed, and employees in small firms—as partners in building fairer families and a fairer society.

*Eve McQuillan is a researcher and campaigner who works on issues ranging from international affairs to housing. Stella McAteer is the deputy head for Quality of Education at the Eko Trust.*

# 2. TROLLS ON TRIAL

## Sarah Swingler

Nearly four in 10 British women (36 per cent) have experienced online harassment or abuse perpetrated on social media or another online platform at some point in their lives. This represents more than 11 million women. Findings by the Turing Institute show that women are more frequently targeted by perpetrators of online harms than men, are more fearful of being targeted, and report a greater negative psychological impact as a result of particular experiences.[4]

While all women and girls are at risk from technology-facilitated harm, some groups are disproportionately affected, according to a 2024 UN Women Report.[5] These include women in public life, journalists, human rights defenders, politicians, feminist activists, and young women and girls. This alone is worrying enough, but it is compounded by the fact that nearly half of X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook users rate these platforms' responses to abusive behaviour as inadequate.

Online abuse of women has offline consequences, including anxiety, panic attacks, the loss of self-esteem and self-censorship. It affects a woman's fundamental rights: to be safe from harm, to express herself freely and participate fully in public life.

Glitch, the campaigning charity, found that nearly three quarters of respondents to its Ripple Effect Report, coauthored with the End Violence Against Women Coalition, saw women change their behaviour after receiving online abuse. They avoided posting opinions, especially on political or gender-related topics. They stopped posting altogether on certain platforms. They became more cautious and less assertive to avoid attracting attention or further harm. And for women and non-binary people from minority and marginalized backgrounds, Glitch found the impact was even worse, with 87.5 per cent reporting modifications in behaviour post abuse.[6]

[4] Stevens, Enock, Sippy, Bright, Cross, Johansson, Wajcman, Margettsa, Understanding gender differences in experiences and concerns surrounding online harms: A nationally representative survey of UK adults, The Alan Turing Institute, 2024

[5] UN Women, Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: Technology-facilitated violence against women and girls - Report of the Secretary General, 2024

[6] Glitch, The ripple effect Covid-19 and the epidemic of online abuse, 2020

A 2020 YouGov poll, commission by Clean Up The Internet, a not-for-profit company, found that 83 per cent of British people think the ability to post anonymously makes people "ruder" online.[7] Some experts interviewed for Revealing Reality's report, Abuse and Anonymity, commissioned by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, describe this as the 'disinhibition effect' – the lowering of social accountability of being anonymous online, which can embolden aggressive or unpleasant behaviour.[8]

Arguably, the reward mechanisms that are designed into social media platforms – likes, follower counts, etc – could also be said to incentivise certain behaviours. This makes for interesting reading given that social media sites (excluding Facebook and LinkedIn) enable a level of pseudonymity that could be a potential barrier to enforcement and user safety.

In my opinion, current laws – such as the Online Safety Act 2023 – are simply not enough to protect against trolling and harassment, because the definitions of various online offences are too narrow. To meet the high threshold of 'threatening communication', offences must involve threats of death, serious injury, or serious financial loss. Other offences include encouraging 'serious self-harm' and sending false information intended to cause 'non-trivial psychological or physical harm'. In the latter case, victims must prove that the sender knew it to be false, which does not protect against pile-ons. A pile-on is a form of online harassment where negative comments are triggered from multiple users by a specific post. In some cases, these pile-ons can be amplified by social media bots – automated accounts often used to promote agendas or spam –by mass-retweeting or liking offensive posts, making them appear more widespread or popular.

Researchers from The Open University carrying out the UK's largest ever study into societal attitudes and experiences of online violence against women and girls across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, found that seven in 10 (68 per cent) believe that current legislation is ineffective at tackling online violence against women and girls in England. This goes some way towards explaining why many victims do not report abuse: they think nothing will happen, or do not trust the police to act. If

[7] Clean up the Internet, Time to take off their masks? How tackling the misuse of anonymity on social media would improve online discourse and reduce abuse and misinformation (YouGov Plc poll commissioned by Clean up the Internet), 2020
[8] Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, Revealing Reality: Abuse and anonymity, 2022

they do report it to platform moderators, all too often harmful content is left up, takes days to remove, or leads to no action.[9]

If victims do want to pursue a defamation case through the civil courts, it is costly and time-consuming. A full High Court trial can drive combined costs above £100,000.[10] Internet trolls know how off-putting this is.

Thankfully, important conversations around the issue of tech-facilitated abuse towards women and girls are now beginning to happen. At a recent meeting of the Northern Ireland affairs select committee about ending violence against women and girls, Professor Olga Jurasz got to the heart of the problem. Her data pointed to three main causes of VAWG: misogyny, online anonymity, and the ease of getting away with it. She raised the impact of online violence on women's participatory rights – notably, that of the victims questioned in her recent Northern Ireland survey, 96 per cent said it had had "impact on their lives", many of these saying it had a "silencing effect", and that they had decided to withdraw from voicing their opinions and participating in online spaces. When this silencing leads to women in politics withdrawing from public life, or choosing not to put themselves forward for selection, not only are these targeted individuals impacted, but it jeopardises the underpinnings of good democracy.

The committee's chair, Tonia Antoniazzi MP, put a key question to Jessica Smith, the online safety principal at Ofcom: 'Why do people choose to commit violence against women and girls online?' Smith conceded that, at the moment, there were particular aspects of the online environment that made it "quite easy" to commit these offences against women and girls online. She spoke about the effect on women who are trying to run a business online, or those simply wanting to connect with family and friends, when they find themselves at the centre of a social media pile-on. Drawing attention to the way platforms moderate content, Smith explained the current problem with these moderation processes. She said that they tend to view posts in isolation that are in fact part of a coordinated, abusive online campaign. This may mean no individual post reaches the threshold of illegality or harassment, whereas were the comments taken together, it would be clear that the onslaught for that woman is often "horrific", and the thread should be shut down.[11]

[9] The Open University, Open Societal Challenges Programme Research into societal attitudes and experiences of online violence against women and girls, 2023
[10] Go Legal, Legal Fees Guide, 2025
[11] Jurasz and Smith, Northern Ireland Affairs Committee: Non-inquiry session - Ending violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland (Oral Evidence), 2025

It is clear to me that to truly tackle all types of online harassment and trolling we need tangible change, consistent across the whole UK. So, how do we prevent it being so easy for perpetrators to get away with it?

1. All content that causes harm to be defined in law. We need a range of powers online that do more than just rely on us blocking perpetrators. Different types of harm should be defined in law – especially where the harm is currently not unlawful or is inconspicuous harm, such as trolling.

2. Mandatory takedown times for gendered abuse. The law needs to be tailored for current online behaviour including robust mandatory takedown times for certain levels of gendered abuse, and tougher rules on anonymity for repeat abusers. Data should also be gathered on how long harmful content is typically left up on sites before it is removed.

3. The introduction of online harm tribunals. There is a strong argument for victims' cases to be heard by tribunals rather than costly court hearings. Tribunals would be **less formal**, **cheaper**, and **faster** — potentially opening access to justice for ordinary people currently priced out of defending their reputation or challenging abuse. Based on existing UK tribunals, such as employment tribunals, this simplified procedure could **cut legal costs by 90–95 per cent** in straightforward cases, equating to estimated costs of **£5,000-£10,000**[12] rather than the current **£100,000** in many cases. This improved accessibility would send a message to trolls, and those who then pile-on, to think before they post.

4. A feasibility study for moving defamation cases from the courts to tribunals should be conducted by a credible and capable body. Well placed to carry this out could be the Law Commission, who were involved in the consultation that led to the UK Defamation Act 2013, which is still the current legal framework for defamation in England and Wales, but which some argue has not kept pace with the rapid evolution of social media.

5. Research into the legal gaps in tackling online misogyny, the impact of gendered online abuse, and a greater understanding of the correlation between creating harmful online content and dangerous offline behavioural patterns. Bringing this topic out of the shadows cannot happen soon enough.

[12] Boys & Maughan Solicitors, Typical Employment Tribunal Costs, 2025

6. Data collection on how many online abuse cases result in conviction. To establish a baseline, data needs gathering on how many online harassment and abuse complaints are made to the police which result in convictions, and how many do not. As well as seeking data on the number of online abuse cases not reported. Plus, there must be a greater understanding of the prevalence of cases of trolling and harassment that escalate to physical harm.

7. Digital citizenship training for all social media users.

Finally, as a preventative step, the government should implement an educational programme on digital citizenship, co-designed with young people, to promote kindness online and combat toxic behaviour.

We won't log off. The law must log on.

*Sarah Swingler is an executive producer who has worked across a variety of television formats.*

# 3. CLOSING THE PENSION GAP

Kirsty Williams / Rowshan Hannan

We have all heard of the gender *pay* gap. But how many of us have heard of the gender *pension* gap? Recent data from Legal & General, a leading pension provider, shows that at retirement women's pension pots are, on average, 55 per cent smaller than men's. This disparity is a result of a combination of factors including workplace inequalities, societal pressures, government policy and pension scheme design. It is a stark but silent injustice that women continue to face.

## Deep roots

Since the Equal Pay Act of 1970, addressing pay disparity between men and women has been, albeit variably, acknowledged as the role of government. Pension disparity between the sexes has not attracted the same attention. For those presently in work, the average occupational pension for a woman will be a shocking 35 per cent less than the average occupational pension for a man. At an international level, the UK compares poorly: it has the fourth highest gender pension gap in OECD nations.

Unsurprisingly, then, two thirds of pensioners living in relative poverty in the UK are women. As we all live longer, one third of our lives is expected to occur during retirement. The gender pension gap isn't just an equality issue, but also important in securing our physical and mental wellbeing later in life.

To achieve just a basic living standard, a single person requires a pension income of £13,400 per annum (PLSA Association 2025). This is less than the new state pension of £11,973 (£230.25 per week). Direct state provision alone does not provide an adequate pension income.

This was implicit within the 2012 Pensions Act, which required employers to enrol eligible employees into a workplace pension scheme, known as autoenrolment. This requirement increased the percentage of the UK workforce paying into a workplace pension from less than 50 per cent to 79 per cent by 2021.

However, for UK workplace pension schemes, the gender pay gap (currently at 13.1 per cent) and differences in employment participation (and thus pension accrual) amplify over a woman's working life to create a wide gap by the time they reach retirement. For example, schemes do not take total earnings into account for qualifying years. This means that women with several low paid, part-time jobs (sometimes to give them more flexibility for childcare) miss out and may not reach the 35 years of contributions needed to secure the full state pension.

Intersectional discrimination also deepens the gender pension gap. Black and Asian women's pensions are lower than those of white women. The same is also true for people with disabilities. Divorce adds further to this disparity: lone parents with dependent children (largely women) accumulate a much smaller pension than married couples with no dependents.

The structure of pension schemes in the UK, as a function of paid work, rewards high pay and continuous employment. It penalises women who have a low income, global majority background, a disability, a caring role or multiple low-paid, part-time jobs. The failure to correct these injustices is a failure of government, pension providers and society at large.

## Gendered pay, care and pensions

Women's lower lifetime earnings – for all the reasons mentioned above, including due to caring responsibilities – results in reduced paid employment participation and reduced pension contribution/accrual. Often pension contribution "breaks" happen when women are in their late 20s/30s for this reason. They can also happen later in life, in their 50s and 60s, as women take on caring responsibilities for grandchildren.

Additionally, our income tax system gives a significant advantage to those on higher income tax brackets incentivising households to focus on the higher earner's pension pot – generally the man's income. This, together with how divorce treats pensions, further increases the gap.

Whilst autoenrolment, introduced in 2012, has significantly increased pension take-up, it only applies at earnings of £10,000 per annum, thereby disqualifying many lower paid workers who have several part-time jobs. Additionally, autoenrolment requires the employer to contribute a minimum of 3 per cent (and only where the employee is contributing 5 per cent), which is a low employer contribution by international standards. Compare this, for example, to Australia, where the employer is obliged to contribute 12 per cent of the employee's salary to the mandatory pension scheme (OECD 2022).

## Defined benefit vs defined contribution

The structure of the pension scheme is also important. In the UK, 79 per cent of employees are contributing to a workplace pension. Of these, 26 per cent are in defined benefit (DB) schemes, under which pension income is fixed and based on earnings. DB schemes provide a predictable income at retirement, where the risk is predominantly borne by the employer. However, over the last few decades, we have seen private sector employers move away from the more beneficial DB schemes to defined contribution (DC) schemes, where the risk is with the employee. Under the DC scheme, benefits and income can fluctuate. Those employers who did not have a workplace pension scheme prior to 2012, have, of course, put in place the statutory minimum as required by the legislation, which is a DC scheme. DB schemes are now generally provided only by the public sector.

There are significant differences between accrual rates of the two schemes, with DC accrual being around 31 per cent of a DB scheme. Consequently, a worker retiring on a salary of approximately £47,000, having paid in for 35 years to the local government (DB) scheme, can expect a pension of approximately £33,000. On the auto-enrolment minimum DC scheme they would get just £10,000.

DC schemes are now the predominant form of workplace pension. In 2012, of all employees paying into a pension scheme only 7 per cent paid into a DC scheme. This increased to 30 per cent by 2021. Conversely, participation in DB schemes over the same period fell from just under 50 per cent of employees with workplace pensions to only 26 per cent. The structure of DC pension scheme rewards consistent contributions in earlier working life. But it is precisely those years when women are more likely to reduce their paid work or withdraw from paid employment completely to take on caring responsibilities. Or it may be the years when women reduce their pension contributions to pay for childcare. With DC schemes, unlike DB schemes, "catch up" in later working life is much more expensive and often out of reach for many women. Without considered reforms, the expansion of DC schemes will widen the gender pension gap.

## Intersectionality along the gendered divide

Consequently, there are stark pension inequalities in the UK, with 50 per cent of the lowest income working population accounting for just one per cent of all personal and occupational pension wealth (excluding state pension) in the UK. Those in the 10$^{th}$ income decile account for 64 per cent of the same. Intersectionality such as ethnicity and disability plays a significant role, with workers who are Asian on average having accrued a pension wealth of £1,800 compared to £44,500 of white workers. Moreover, those

with a long-standing disability or illness accrued less than a third of the pension wealth accrued by those without an illness or disability. There are also significant differences across household types, with single parent households having 5 per cent of the pension savings of a couple with no children (ONS Census 2021).

Inadequate attempts to reduce pensioner poverty combined with modernising the state pension by previous governments have led to political difficulties for this Labour government (eg the winter fuel allowance and Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI)). This highlights the failure of successive governments to address the structural issues contributing to the gender pension gap.

# Closing the gender pension gap

Closing the gender pension gap requires a three-pronged approach: government policy change, greater employer responsibility and changes to pension scheme design.

## Government policy change

The government has a key role to play in encouraging more equitable pension growth across both the private and public spheres.

- **Lower autoenrolment** age from 21 to 18, allowing people to start contributing their pensions earlier.
- **Abolish autoenrolment from £10,000 earnings threshold to zero**, allowing lower paid workers and those with multiple part-time jobs to be included.
- **Increase minimum employer contributions** from the current 3 per cent to at least 6 per cent, bringing the UK closer to other OECD contribution levels.
- **Employer contributions to not be dependent on employee contributions.**
- **Employer contributions to continue during parental leave**, regardless of employee contributions.
- **Additional state pension for unpaid carer roles** as in other OECD countries.
- **Requirements for employers to report annually on the gender pension gap** (similar to gender pay gap reporting) and the measures they are taking to help reduce this.
- **Linked pension schemes between couples** encouraged through tax incentives, with annual equity checks and automatic re-balancing unless they opt out**.**
- **Mandatory pension sharing in divorce proceedings**.

## Greater employer responsibility

In addition to the policy changes suggested that would impact employers, there are other measures they could follow to close the gender pension gap.

- **Allow flexible ways for employees to add to their pension wealth**, particularly for women returning from maternity leave or working part-time.
- **Human resource teams undertake regular pensions health check** across employees, similar to salary benchmarking initiatives.
- **Work with pension providers to create tools that allow employees to manage their pensions more proactively**, e.g. pension dashboards, retirement planners.
- **Organise pension awareness and pension management talks** in the workplace.

## Changes to pension scheme design

- **Allow couples to pay into each other's pensions** more easily - particularly useful during caregiving gaps.
- **Design shared pension pots for couples** where both parties can contribute differing amounts (or not at all) but have equal share at retirement.

# Why now?

We have rightly focused efforts recently on closing the gender pay gap. We now need to recognise the shadow this casts on the wide gender pension gap. The former cannot and should not be closed without the latter. Structural factors that contribute to the gender pay gap are amplified in our pensions. For example, reduced employment participation due to the high cost of childcare in the UK, and women in their 50s and 60s propping up a broken social care system as unpaid carers.

Although societal norms and expectations play a significant part in this problem, there are simple steps that the government, employers and pension providers can take to address the gap. Trade unions have a role too in raising awareness amongst members. This injustice has been silenced for too long, and now needs to be tackled as part of the Labour government's efforts on fixing the economy. The government has taken steps towards this approach already through their current consultation on the access and fairness of local government pension schemes (for England and Wales). This has a strong focus on the gender pension gap and includes proposals

mentioned here, such as mandatory pension gap reporting. This consultation is one element of Rachel Reeves' proposals to merge public sector funds and unlock capital investment to stimulate growth.

As we have seen in the first year of this Labour government, there are significant costs - politically and economically - to those who tinker with a far from perfect pension system. We need a brave approach to correct this injustice, and allow women equal dignity as men in retirement.

*Kirsty Williams is a member of the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales. She was Welsh minister for education. Rowshan Hannan is a Labour councillor for East Greenwich and a policy impact lead at the University of Oxford.*

# 4. TREAT HER BETTER

Rachel Adeosun / Nicola Hubbard / Finella Craig / Amelia Quince

The UK has the largest gender health gap of any G20 country. This shocking statistic points to a health system that is detrimental to women's wellbeing and which negatively affects the UK economy. A 2024 survey by the Fawcett Society and Benenden Health, a healthcare provider, found that 150m working days are lost annually to women experiencing poor health and a lack of suitable support.

Three years ago, the Conservative government released a women's health strategy for England that claimed we would see a radical improvement to "the way in which the health and care system engages [with] and listens to all women and girls". We have found no evidence to suggest any such 'radical' improvements. The current Labour government's 10 Year Health Plan for England, however, makes no mention of addressing the gender health gap. Women are only expressly mentioned in two areas: increasing the uptake of the HPV vaccination, which will help eradicate cervical cancer; and the establishment of a national maternity and neonatal task force. (Both are moves, of course, that we welcome wholeheartedly.)

## Maternity care must prioritise listening to women

Even within areas of healthcare that affect only women, there is a recurring theme of women's voices not being heard on issues relating to their own body or being given insufficient information to make their own informed choices.

This is exemplified by one of the authors' professional experiences, that women who are highly traumatised by vaginal interventions as a result of domestic or sexual abuse are not routinely offered caesarean sections. This is despite the fact that vaginal delivery poses its own risks, with 85 per cent of women experiencing some degree of perineal trauma during childbirth.

The 2015 case Montgomery v Lanarkshire Health Board is considered to be a landmark decision when it comes to women's consent and the right to choose. Nadine Montgomery had diabetes during her pregnancy and was at

known risk of having a larger baby and complicated delivery. She raised these concerns with her obstetrician, who continued to recommend a high-risk vaginal delivery. Her obstetrician later said that it was not her standard practice to advise women on the risks of the baby's shoulders becoming lodged in the birth canal as they would likely opt for a caesarean section, 'which was not in the maternal interest'. Nadine's son did become obstructed during the delivery (which would have been avoided by a caesarean section) and has serious disabilities as a consequence.

One of the judges, Lady Hale, who found the health board to be at fault, specifically addressed the words used by the obstetrician in her concurring judgement: "it looks like a judgment that vaginal delivery is in some way morally preferable to a caesarean section: so much so that it justifies depriving the pregnant woman of the information needed for her to make a free choice in the matter."

This 'moral preference' for vaginal delivery is a clear example of medical misogyny, whether borne out in the practices of male or female medical professionals, and is deeply rooted in an outdated, stigmatising idea that women should deliver by the 'natural way'. The answer is simple: listen to women's concerns, explain the risks of all delivery options without bias or judgment, and offer the option of caesarean section unless contraindicated.

Of course, gender-based discrimination in healthcare is not limited to maternity care. It is commonplace, with severe impacts on health outcomes which are all the more pronounced for minority ethnic women and women on low incomes.

## Women from ethnic minority groups experience inequality in health and access

A 2025 study by the King's Fund found that South Asian and Black women experience a higher incidence of some common, preventable conditions, and had worse maternal mortality rates. Some women from minority ethnic groups face barriers to staying healthy and accessing health care due to the way health care services are structured.

## Black women experience cancer disparities

A 2025 American Cancer Society report, Cancer Statistics for African American and Black People, highlighted that Black women have a 10 per cent higher cancer mortality than white women, despite a 9 per cent lower incidence. And although Black women have a lower or similar incidence of breast and uterine cancer to white women, they have a 38 per cent higher

likelihood of dying from breast cancer and a twofold higher risk of dying from uterine cancer.

A 2019 study in Nature showed that while individuals of European ancestry represent only 16 per cent of the global population, they accounted for approximately 80 per cent of research participants. The significant underrepresentation of Black women in genomics and clinical trials for new cancer drugs suggests that preventative and therapeutic interventions are not tailored to their specific biology and needs, lowering the rate of effectiveness and applicability. For example, research published in Nature in 2025 showed that women of African ancestry were diagnosed with breast cancer around five years younger than white women but died nearly nine years younger on average, and were likely to be diagnosed at a more advanced disease stage. This suggests that current NHS guidelines, recommending breast screening only from age 50, may not be adequate for women of African heritage.

The causes of ongoing disparities for Black women are multifactorial and not limited only to research. Inherent mistrust in the healthcare system, rooted in a background of racism and unconscious bias, alongside socioeconomic inequalities, cultural barriers and stigmatisation in the community, must also be addressed.

## Women on a low income receive worse care

Socioeconomic inequalities are a critical driver of health disparities according to a recent LSE policy report. They include financial constraints, caregiving responsibilities and difficulty taking time off work for appointments. A stark example of this was published in Breast Cancer Research and Treatment, which showed how low socioeconomic status is associated with increased risk of aggressive premenopausal breast cancers as well as late stage of diagnosis and poorer survival.

## Why the sex of your surgeon matters

The gender health gap does not only concern health issues that are exclusively female. When having surgery more generally women with a male rather than a female surgeon have an 11 per cent higher rate of readmission to a hospital, a 16 per cent higher rate of complications, and a 32 per cent higher risk of death, according to a 2021 article in the Journal of the American Medical Association. The authors suggest that implicit sex biases, an underappreciation of the severity of symptoms in women, incomplete examinations post-operation and different communication styles were potential factors in this disparity.

### Female medics experience gender-based discrimination (GBD)

Research published in Medical Teacher found that that 74 per cent of medical students had either witnessed or personally experienced gender-based discrimination or sexual harassment, predominately perpetrated by senior male staff. Only 5 per cent who experienced these incidents reported them.

## Unequal heart attack care

Research published in 2019 in the European Heart Journal found that women are less likely to receive CPR if they have a cardiac arrest outside hospital, are less likely to survive the journey to hospital, and are less likely than men to survive to be discharged. One factor contributing to this is that bystanders did not recognise that women who collapsed were having a cardiac arrest, resulting in delays calling emergency services or starting CPR. More recent research found that male bystanders feared accusations of sexual assault.

## What can our NHS do to treat women better?

### 1. Add preventative women's healthcare to the 10-year plan

The new 10-year Health Plan for England must not only focus on general illness prevention, but on preventative women's healthcare which supports and listens to women and girls throughout their lives. Ethnic and socioeconomic variables that further contribute to existing gender inequality must also be addressed, alongside the underrepresentation of women in medical research studies.

One measure to achieve this would be to provide a yearly, culturally competent women's health check from the age of 16. This would enable women to access, for example, gender-appropriate health screening, timely and appropriate contraception advice, urogynaecological support, HPV vaccination and fast-tracked support for safeguarding issues.

Although research is needed into the associated cost savings of annual reviews, a 2025 NHS Confederation report found that for every additional £1 of public investment in women's health services in England there is an estimated return on investment of £11.

### 2. Introduce gender-based discrimination awareness training for medical students

We also believe that institutional GBD in healthcare must be addressed from the onset of training. To tackle gender-based harassment in healthcare settings, active bystander training should be a requirement of all student education programmes. The training focuses on equipping people with the skills and confidence to intervene safely and effectively, whether by directly addressing the behaviour, distracting those involved, delegating to someone with more authority, or delaying intervention to assess the situation.

We also recommend teaching hospitals provide allyship workshops, for both students and those in leadership positions, to challenge GBD.

## Treat her better: our recommendations

The outlook for women in the UK system is both bleak and alarming. It is imperative that we see a shift that puts women's health at the forefront of the agenda. A demand to 'treat her better' should not require justification, but it is true that women have a unique role in societal wealth and wellbeing, representing 70 per cent of the global health workforce and providing most of the informal care in communities. Investing in women's healthcare is not solely a moral responsibility, then, but also a social and economic necessity.

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# 5. GOVERN FOR GOOD

## Sally Rees / Carolyn Roberts

When Sally Rees, a schoolteacher from Enniskillen in Northern Ireland, was called to her principal's office, she didn't expect to meet the police. She certainly didn't expect to be told about a USB stick found in school containing images filmed up her skirt and that of a colleague.

Sally assumed there would be serious consequences for the 16-year-old pupil responsible, both in school and in law. How wrong she was. Not only did the school not expel him; they even expected Sally to carry on teaching him. Adding insult to injury, they rewarded him with the position of prefect… *of film*!

The subsequent battle that Sally and her trade union, NASUWT, fought with the school exposed institutional misogyny at every level: children, classroom teachers, principal and the board of governors. While the school's behaviour policy clearly stated that a 'one-off sexual offence' could lead to expulsion, it did not recognise upskirting as a sexual offence. Therefore, the principal and governors decided that the pupil's right to an education superseded Sally's rights to be treated with dignity and respect and to feel safe in her workplace.

What can we learn from Sally's fight for justice?

## Balancing the entitlement of the child with the adult's safe workplace

The realities of teaching are complex, and require clear and sophisticated thinking by leaders both paid and voluntary. Schools have a duty to support young people as they experiment and grow into good citizens. Their behaviour policies, however, are their own business, and exist on a continuum from trauma-informed to zero tolerance. How can we balance the entitlement of the child with the adult's right to a safe workplace? What might have helped this school leader and board of governors to make a different decision?

# The rise of misogyny and sexual harassment in schools

Sadly, Sally is not alone in her experience. Reports of a rise in misogyny and sexual harassment in our schools are widespread, ranging from derogatory, sexualised language to image-based sexual abuse and physical assaults. Everyone's Invited, the online platform which aims to expose and eradicate rape culture by providing a safe space for survivors to tell their story, has now reached over 52,000 submissions from pupils and teachers in the UK. A NASUWT survey in March 2025 detailed how social media is fuelling the behaviour crisis in our schools. As one teacher succinctly put it: "sexist and violent content is mimicked in the classroom."

Time and time again, teachers are reporting that when there is a problem, it is not dealt with satisfactorily by their school. As a result, teachers are underreporting the level of abuse due to limited confidence in how it will be dealt with, as borne out by one teacher, who said: "It was so frequent; I did not have the energy to record everything. Reliving the situation was significantly negatively impacting my mental health and wellbeing".

When schools refuse to deal with incidents of misogyny and sexual harassment in a robust way, they are sending a damaging message to both boys and girls. By normalising a misogynistic culture, they are not only telling boys how they can treat girls and women, but also how girls and women can expect to be treated. UK Feminista's deputy director, Nina Humphries, said: "It is deeply concerning that misogyny is so normalised in schools. This fuels violence against women and girls and limits the aspirations of all young people."

# How do we tackle sexual harassment in schools?

The welcome updated relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) statutory guidance for 2025 encourages a robust whole-school approach to preventing sexual harassment and violence in schools, with a focus on recognising misogyny and harmful gender stereotypes. It calls on staff "within and beyond the classroom…to be conscious of everyday sexism, misogyny, homophobia and stereotypes, and [to] take action to build a culture where prejudice is identified and tackled." For this call to be effective, RSHE policy needs to align with a school's behaviour policy, outlining clear procedures for responding to incidents of misogyny or sexual harassment and so reinforcing the idea that such actions are violations of both the school's behaviour expectations and society's values. The RSHE curriculum should lay the groundwork for preventing harmful attitudes,

while the behaviour policy should provide the framework for responding to harmful actions, creating a safe, respectful environment that actively works to end violence against women and girls.

The employment rights bill will be another key part of the way forward. It aims to strengthen measures against workplace sexual harassment by requiring employers to take "all reasonable steps" to prevent it, a shift from the current "reasonable steps" standard. Schools should be no exception, but how can leaders be supported to make good decisions for both children and adults? Governors and trustees take mandatory training on safeguarding children. But safeguarding employees is important, too. Apart from anything, behaviour is a huge factor in the current teacher retention crisis, second only to workload as a reason for teachers leaving the profession. If school leaders and governors facing difficult decisions could be helped to reflect upon teachers' experiences, perhaps they could protect the workplace and help retain teachers. They might avoid putting any teacher in Sally's position – expecting her to continue teaching the pupil and rewarding the pupil who had done her harm.

The UK's more than 300,000 school governors and trustees are the largest volunteer group in the country. The Department of Education mandates safeguarding and Prevent training, but leaves the induction and development of governors to the discretion of each board. This decentralised approach means the quality of training and the participation of governors is variable. And there is no centralised data, which makes it impossible to estimate the uptake of training.

## What do our school governors need to help them make tricky ethical decisions?

Governors and trustees would be helped by mandatory training utilising the framework for ethical leadership in education (FELE) . This framework was developed by the Ethical Leadership Commission between 2016 and 2018, which had representation from schools, Ofsted, unions, churches and training organisations. It set up a structure to enable leaders to navigate difficult decision-making and develop a shared language to discuss dilemmas. This framework is currently used in hundreds of schools and is central to the governor and trustee training offered by the influential National Governance Association (NGA). However, it is not a mandatory part of English governance training. The framework was featured in the committee for standards in public life's annual report in 2023. That report concludes with 20 questions boards should consider, under the headings of:

1. Communicating values and leading by example.

2. Encouraging a 'speak up' culture.

3. Training, discussion and decision-making.

4. Governance.

5. Recruitment and performance management.

Why is this framework so good? First, it uses the values of the 'seven principles of public life', or the Nolan principles, which apply to all public officeholders: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Additionally, the commission added seven virtues: trust, wisdom, kindness, justice, service, courage and optimism. Second, it has been rigorously road tested. The National Governance Association (NGA) was a key partner on the commission and enthusiastically adopted FELE in 2019 as a cornerstone of good school leadership and governance. Hundreds of schools scrutinised the framework by using the NGA's ethical audit for governors and trustees.

The NGA's own audit has found that it:

- Is adaptable to a school without creating extra work.
- Establishes common language to direct governance and leadership discussions and decision-making.
- Shapes a school's culture and gives its leaders confidence.
- Is useful in recruitment processes at all levels.
- Affects curriculum decisions.
- Provides a shared language in times of difficulty and controversy.
- Helps multi-academy trusts (MATs) provide consistency.
- Fosters a whole school approach affecting the whole community; students, parents, staff, governors and trustees.

Sally's school leader and governors failed to do the right thing. They failed to balance their responsibility to the offending pupil against their responsibility to their teachers. In response, we are calling for mandatory governance training so that other school leaders and boards may avoid such mistakes and make sound responses which balance the duties of care to pupils and staff.

## How can this training be implemented?

1. Governance boards and regional organisations should review the existing training modules available to and used by governors.

2. All school leaders, governors and trustees should undertake the NGA Ethical Audit and related training.

3. Boards should adopt the framework for ethical leadership in education (FELE) as an approach to decision-making.

4. Boards should match themselves against the 20 questions set out in the committee on standards in public life report, Leading in Practice.

5. School leaders, governors and trustees should be required to consider their duty of care to employees as well as pupils.

6. School leaders and governors should be supported by trade unions through the joint consultative committee (JCNC) model.

7. The government should establish an inspectorate to investigate and report specifically upon perceptions of teacher safety in school.

8. The government should provide funding and resources to support training.

Sally had to go to the courts to protect herself and others from sexual assault. Her battle led to the introduction of upskirting as a criminal sexual offence in Northern Ireland, but the consequences of every governance decision will not be so far-reaching. Nonetheless, devising a behaviour policy, implementing it and making its consequences stick are fearsomely difficult responsibilities for school leaders, governors and trustees. While both paid and voluntary school leaders can usually be trusted to do the right thing, better mandatory training using FELE will help them face difficult decisions bravely, prevent them from leaning on easy solutions and enable them to reflect upon their mistakes.

Good leaders must face, rather than flinch from, ambiguity. What you sweep under the carpet will trip you up in the end.

*Sally Rees is the former president of NASUWT, Northern Ireland and a teacher & leader of learning creative and expressive arts. Carolyn Roberts is a former headteacher and the author of Ethical Leadership for a Better Education System: what kind of people are we?*

# 6. ABOUT TIME

Cecilia Jastrzembska

Male violence against women and girls (M)VAWG is a global crisis, and addressing it is an essential step toward justice and equality. Yet here in the UK, our judicial system fails to recognise the gendered nature of the majority of violent crimes committed against women as an active factor in the broader persecution of women. This includes verbal harassment; coercive control; psychological, domestic and economic abuse; sexual assault; and, in the worst cases, femicide.

There are nine characteristics which are already protected under the Equality Act 2010, including race, religion and sexual orientation. Hate crimes are defined as criminal acts which are motivated, wholly or partly, by hostility or prejudice toward a person's protected characteristic(s). The omission of sex and gender from this list represents a failure to acknowledge the ideological drivers behind so much of the violence, harassment and abuse women experience daily. In doing so, our judicial system allows much of this misogyny to go unchecked, and continues to falsely treat these incidents as isolated, rather than as part of a wider, often escalatory pattern of gender-based hostility. It is absurd that it is explicitly unacceptable in law to discriminate on the basis of a person being married, yet not on the basis of being a woman.

## A culture of impunity

> "At the heart of this crisis lies a failure to identify, record, and address gender-based violence (GBV) early enough." - *Leah Rea, Young European Movement, Break The Silence campaign*

For decades, (M)VAWG in the UK has not been addressed with even a fraction of the seriousness it warrants, legislatively or judicially. One woman is killed every three days in the UK, and, most shockingly, there has not been a tangible decline in the rate of women killed by men since 2009. The culture of shame and silence which surrounds the issue, as well as low trust in the police, means that many victims are re-traumatised. In addition, unacceptably low conviction rates are ultimately resulting in a lack of justice being served. Five in six women (83 per cent) who are raped do not report it, which speaks volumes – and consequently means that the scale of the problem is being massively obscured.

"A world that asks survivors to stay quiet is a world that chooses the comfort of the oppressors over the safety of the victims." - *Marta Haba, member of the Youth Advisory Committee*

## The role of the media in victim blaming

"We know (abuse) remains highly underreported because as a society we still frequently treat victims as being responsible for their own abuse and keeping themselves safe." - *Andrea Simon, director of the End Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition*

One of the key contributors to the damaging narrative around (M)VAWG is disingenuous reporting. Violence is not just passively 'happening' to women as so many headlines would have us believe – eg, from the Times: Unlit Parks Stop Women Running and Cycling in Winter. Instead, it is actively and increasingly being chosen by men. As Gisèle Pelicot said in her rape trial testimony: "shame must change sides". This is not to say that we must start uniformly shaming men. However, we need to label male violence as what it is – male-perpetrated – and end the toxic victim-blaming culture which stops women from reporting their assaults and stigmatises constructive discussion of the issue more widely. We need to instill concepts of consent in men from a young age, and proactively involve them as an integral part of a prevention-based solution, rather than conducting damage control when suffering has already been inflicted on women. Or, even worse, when it is too late to do anything.

## From crisis to emergency; the rise of the manosphere

"Perpetrators aren't individual monsters; they are people reflecting a system. We need to address that system." - *Jackson Katz, author of Every Man: Why Violence Against Women Is a Men's Issue*

With the rise of the "manosphere", driven by the likes of Donnie O'Sullivan, Andrew Tate and Trump, the sharp trajectory of radicalization we are seeing of young boys and men is only set to worsen, and exponentially so.

Already, we are seeing acts of violence being committed at younger ages, including an increase in 'manslamming' – where women are purposely barged into – as well as women being shoved, chased, and even punched on public transport and in public spaces. This is a direct reflection of the growing, misogynistic belief that women don't deserve to take up space. In fact, violent crime against women has risen 37 per cent in the last three years, and the indoctrination of young boys online is now being treated as

extremism. In 2024, the National Police Chiefs Council finally declared (M)VAWG a national emergency.

Worryingly, the manosphere is now rapidly making the transition from abusive men's rights subculture to mainstream as the backlash against feminism compounds and AI systems multiply biases. Although the recognition of the gravity of this situation is welcome, it is long, long overdue.

## Male violence: a constant threat

Male violence is a pervasive and insidious presence in women's everyday lives, as demonstrated by a heat map study which visualised the stark difference in visual focus between men and women on their way home. In Britain, over 70 per cent of all women and 88 per cent of those aged 18-24 have taken steps to guard against harassment.

The recent Fabian pamphlet, Only Halfway? A Rights-Based Approach to Ending Violence Against Women In The UK, by Dr Purna Sen and Dr Sara Hyde, highlighted the nature of both the impact and narrative of (M)VAWG: "Violence against women impacts all women – not only the direct victims. It weaves into the minds and bodies of women that threats lurk everywhere and that they should always be watchful, adjusting their behaviours to minimise the risks. These messages convey that violence is to be expected, and that to challenge incurs further risks, including disbelief, stigmatisation and material loss".

## The financial cost of misogyny

Women's Aid estimates the cost of a woman leaving an abusive relationship at £50,000 based on the direct financial impact of fleeing and building a new life. Women are paying the price, day in, day out; materially and psychologically at best, and at worst, with their lives.

On top of this, there is the undeniable overarching cost: when women are harmed by men, society haemorrhages, both financially and socially. Gender-based violence costs the UK £40bn annually, and The National Audit Office estimates the annual cost of modern slavery at £248m.

The human cost is also significant, with families and communities left traumatised, grieving for partners, mothers, daughters, and sisters who have been harmed or murdered; an experience that is often felt through generations and is, of course, incalculable. The upshot is simple: the cost of continued inaction on misogynistic violence is intolerable, both for women and for wider society.

# The hidden toll: abuse as a cause for female suicide

The extent of women losing their lives to abuse after the fact largely goes unseen. One in eight female suicides and suicide attempts in the UK are due to domestic abuse – equating to 200 women taking their own lives every year. Yet this shocking statistic is almost entirely absent from public discourse. The result is that all too often this connection is missed, and preventable deaths are recorded as unavoidable tragedies. Crucially, this forms a significant obstacle for loved ones seeking justice at the inquest stage.

# Data or it didn't happen: tackling the (M)VAWG emergency

> "Not joining together hate crime legislation especially ignores the experiences of women from minority communities who experience hatred based on multiple factors." - *the Fawcett Society's joint public response to the Law Commission's Review of misogyny as a hate crime.*

What we cannot record, we cannot redress. Making misogyny a hate crime isn't about creating a new offence, but about giving the legal system the tools to identify, track and tackle gendered violence systematically. It would necessitate the national provision of vital data which can inform a prevention-based approach rather than one based on consequence mitigation. This would allow experts to analyse key data, thus strengthening and reforming protection mechanisms for victims. It would also lend crucial visibility to the intersectional experiences of women from minoritised communities and strengthen justice for abusers.

Change is already supported by 20 leading women's rights organisations, including Women's Aid and the Fawcett Society. In fact, multiple MPs and four major political parties actually committed to making misogyny a hate crime in 2023, and the House of Lords previously voted for an amendment to the Police, Crime and Sentencing Act to the same effect. With such a demonstrable uptick in the manifestation of misogyny, it begs the question as to why we are seeing no further movement on this issue.

> "Violence against women is a systemic problem within society, rather than something the majority of men can distance themselves from" - *National Policing Statement*

It is undeniably difficult to talk about (M)VAWG without catastrophising, especially now. However, to effect lasting change, we must. Although it is

imperative to continue to raise awareness of the urgency of redressing it, it is also important to simultaneously promote the positivity and possibility of a society free from it.

By positioning ourselves as champions of a safe world in which women and girls can thrive, unfettered by fear, degradation, abuse or coercion, we can significantly improve the narrative. For example, by framing men who speak up against sexual harassment as strong, and good allies, we make this aspirational, which significantly increases the likelihood of success. By bringing positive role models into the conversation such as athletes, philanthropists, industry leaders and changemakers, it makes it far easier for other men to feel comfortable about speaking out when they hear or see something that crosses those lines. Tackling (M)VAWG must not fall solely to women; it is a society-wide challenge, and so are its unmistakable benefits.

## The state's obligation to women

"The UK must ensure full compliance with its obligations imposed under international law to recognise and address gender-based violence as the critical human rights issue it is. Political pledges are not enough; legislative action is needed to signal a genuine commitment to address (M)VAWG." - *Leah Rea, president, Agora Thinktank*

It must be recognised that to live free from violence is our inalienable human right, and it needs to be framed as such, rather than women being expected to internalise the violence they are subjected to. The statistics are clear: crimes committed against women are not taking place in a vacuum, but are part of a continuum of misogyny, and our current framework is not fit for purpose. It is a state obligation to not only halve but eliminate (M)VAWG, and lack of progress is de facto state neglect and an egregious human rights violation. Progress can only be measured if there are metrics to do so; and for that, the government needs to record, monitor and act in an informed and joined up way. This is why misogyny must be classified as a hate crime. There is no better nor more urgent time than now to tackle this properly and take meaningful steps to strengthen legislation on it. Women's lives are increasingly on the line.

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