

UK Women: Rights & Progress

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NGO Review and Report
Produced by Members of the
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**UK NGO Report in response to the UK Answers to the
UNECE Questionnaire on the implementation of the
Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the
Outcome of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the
General Assembly held July 2000**

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While we very much welcome the work of the Government Equalities Office (GEO) in compiling the Government's report, we were naturally disappointed that they did so without consulting women's organisations as proposed in UN Women's guidelines. In this report we therefore follow independently the process that we would have liked to have undertaken collaboratively with the Government: we assess briefly the progress made in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) over the last 20 years, welcome the achievements listed in the Government's own report note ongoing challenges, and make some recommendations for key actions. We welcome particularly the acknowledgement in the Government's Report that there is still considerable work to be done and that we have by no means achieved gender equality. We also appreciate that the Government is now planning a consultation and a new accessible report to be produced in collaboration with civil society celebrating the Platform for Action.

That said, we have concerns about some omissions in the Government report that we wish to highlight. In doing so we draw on other recent reports, including the reports of visits from various UN Special Rapporteurs, the CEDAW Committee's 2013 review of the UK (Committee's Concluding Observations), the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and UK Shadow Reports; in particular, we have restated a number of recommendations contained in the report *Women's Equality in the UK: A health check*² produced through a process of consultation with the CEDAW Shadow Report Group of women's organisations coordinated by WRC (2013).

We will set out our assessment, including achievements, areas of concern and recommendations, in full elsewhere. **This summary** focuses on areas of particular concern, looking at the issues that we believe are the most pressing or where there has been a significant omission from the Government report.

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Progress Over 20 Years

Fundamental Change

Since 1995 the greatest change experienced in everyday life is the exponential growth of the internet and all forms of mobile communication. Developing countries have also embraced mobile phones as a less expensive way to have a communication infrastructure than land lines. However, this technology has also led to serious misuse, including the harassment and abuse particularly of women and girls. Even as it offers, through social media, opportunities being used by women as well as men for influencing governments, it also offers opportunities for the sale and coercion of human beings and the invasion of privacy.

At the Beijing Conference, we still sent documents by fax. If there was email it was slow and not reliable, and laptops were heavy and expensive. There were no tablets.

The preceding three 'women's conferences' - actually named 'Equality, Development and Peace' - had already paved the way for a thoroughgoing understanding of women's inequality and pervasive experience of discrimination in every area and at every level - in all countries, communities, and social groups. And within families and couples. Men's violence against women and girls was recognised as endemic. The EU, from the Treaty of Rome onwards, identified equality between women and men as a value of the Union and sought through Gender Equality Road Maps and measures to prevent discrimination, not only against women and girls but also against those within the range of 'protected characteristics' - all of which are cross-cutting with gender. But at Beijing in 1995, 35,000 to 40,000 women from all over the world gathered in Huairou to exchange stories and develop their vision and plans for a different future. The half-hour distance from where the governments (overwhelmingly male) were gathered making history did not prevent the lobbying and the support for the UN agencies seeking to achieve the goals many, including the UK Government, shared.

In the 20 years since Beijing, the world has seen a series of internal and inter-state conflicts, leading to mass displacement of people, especially women and children, economic turbulence, deepening religious fundamentalism and terrorism on a grand scale. These harrowing events have in turn offered opportunities for powerful global interests to develop global trade in small arms and drugs and to traffic human beings for cheap labour. Women in particular are trafficked for both domestic and sexual exploitation including prostitution. This modern slavery is fuelled by increasingly degrading and violent pornography readily available in a click to everyone - men, women of all ages, the boy child, the girl child. But trafficking also happens within the UK, between cities and towns and villages, and from and between families too. Prostitution exists also everywhere without trafficking. We want to see the events 'over there' understood as part of *our* problem, the 'other' less exoticised, and the great waste of human potential concentrated in women released and rewarded through a rights-based focussed programme of equality in all areas of life. This is needed throughout the world and across the four nations of the UK.

We congratulate the governments of the interim period since 1995 on the range of legal and policy steps taken and welcome the more recent achievements cited in the UK Government review.

During the drafting of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) we were delighted that the UK Government took a leading role and actively supported UK women's NGOs in making a contribution. Subsequently in 1997 the incoming Government took some significant steps to strengthen women's legal rights, by transposing into UK law a number of new rights originating in the EU, including inter alia paid statutory holidays and the

national minimum wage, and published the first childcare strategy for Great Britain. These new rights strengthened women's position more than men's as they were, and continue to be, more likely to suffer from poverty than men, and more likely to be working part time, earning a low income or the minimum wage, and taking the major responsibility for unpaid caring, which presents a significant barrier to entry in the labour market.

Until the global recession in 2008, these strategic initiatives made a positive impact on women's economic position; for example, the gender pay gap was shrinking year-on-year, albeit slowly. However, with the advent of austerity, cuts to benefits and services and the weakening of equalities legislation have disproportionately affected women and rolled back some of the progress made towards implementing the BPFA. For example, it is no longer mandatory for government departments in England, though it is in Wales, to complete equality impact assessments of new policy proposals. This is despite the fact that Article 2 of CEDAW requires governments: "To take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women". Article 4 goes on to explicitly state that: "Adoption by States Parties of temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination". Yet not only does there seem to be a reluctance to implement compulsory measures to promote the advancement of women, temporary special measures have also not been adopted, as we would hope by the Government.

Promoting the Beijing Platform for Action at Home and Abroad

We are connected in many ways with women all over the world; women globally share problems because gender inequality exists everywhere, as does men's violence against women and girls. Hence, we seek consistency from the UK Government between its overseas and its domestic policy. For example, sexual violence in war was the topic of a Global Summit organised by the FCO in June, 2014. We welcome this - many of us participated in it - but we note that, although there is a UK action plan on VAWG, sexual violence within the UK does not receive the same level of attention. Similarly, DFID creditably takes a gendered approach to its overseas aid; we particularly welcome the support that the UK Government gave in the creation of UN Women and their ongoing support as a significant donor.³ However, there is much less attention given to gender mainstreaming within the domestic departments. There is an Inter-Ministerial Group on Equalities, and the Gender Directors' Network, consisting of representatives from the four nations of the UK, has been focussing on implementation of CEDAW. Nor do we underestimate the considerable impact that having leading women in Cabinet can make on issues of equality for women. However, this is inadequate and the lack of collective leadership on gender equality shows in the absence of real gendered analysis and concrete outcomes. Following a legal challenge, Treasury has improved its gender impact assessment. Furthermore, work with the EHRC through an Advisory committee including civil society, academics and the National Institute for Economic and Social Research (NIESR) has led to a 'step change' in the quality of data collection and analysis.⁴ However, there is little in-house expertise on gender budgeting. The BPFA stresses the inclusion of women's organisations in gender mainstreaming and this requires authoritative and resourced structures and mechanisms. The Government Equalities Office (GEO) provides an essential focal point and has built strong consultative relationships with selected groups of NGOs, but is severely under-resourced given the tasks it is required to undertake.

The Women's National Commission, which previously acted as an independent body to bring the voice of women to government, was abolished in 2010 and its independent consultative role has not been continued. This means decision-making on agendas and consultation with civil society rests inside the Government, not with women's organisations. The engagement programme with women is run by the GEO. Scotland funds

two infrastructure women's organisations to give them advice; Wales funds project work, research and advice, and Northern Ireland Departments have supported attendance at CSW. However, there is no funding from Westminster for any women's infrastructure organisation. Yet we believe engagement with civil society at the policy development stage can go a long way to ensure subsequent implementation.

NGOs are concerned that the funding for the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has been cut significantly since 2010 - from £70m in 2007 to £20.7m overall in 2015. This severely reduces its capacity to oversee the implementation of the BPFA. The EHRC was formed following the amalgamation of three separate equality commissions whose budget, without human rights responsibilities, was around £47m in 2007. The reduced staffing levels projected for the Commission will be equivalent to the numbers that previously worked for just one of the three commissions it replaced including the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) which dealt with sex equality⁵ (which itself had a budget less than half that of the other two commissions which dealt with race and disability - another example of under-resourcing gender equality).

Monitoring the Beijing Platform for Action

The basic data required to monitor implementing of the BPFA are also inadequate. The EHRC has told the CEDAW Committee that cuts in state statistics will hamper its reports to Parliament.⁶ Losses include the Wealth and Assets Survey measuring assets, debt and savings by employment status, disaggregated by sex, ethnic group, religion, disability and age. In 2010 it showed a high degree of inequality. The Citizenship Survey covered a broad range of equality characteristics: sex, age, disability, ethnic group, marital and civil partnership status, religion, and sexual identity. The Tellus survey collected data on children's and young people's bullying and fear of crime, and girls' influence over their own lives. It is important that when the Government considers reducing its data collection that it shows due regard to equality. There is a lack of data disaggregated by gender and older age, by multiple aspects of identity such as disability and gender, about women who are institutionalised, and about Travelling and Roma women, who do not live in fixed locations. Nor is 'marital status' a disaggregated category despite greater poverty for single women; statistics must also be collected on widows and divorced women. The EHRC's research on Gypsies and Travellers suggests they are the most disadvantaged groups in the UK, and women in this community are worse off on a number of indicators.⁷ But further data are needed. The EHRC's research suggests that disability-related harassment is widespread.⁸ However, comprehensive statistics are not available. Information, analysis and regulatory scrutiny of public authorities in England has been further reduced by the abolition of the Audit Commission and changes to the role of the Care Quality Commission in respect of local authorities.⁹

The Global Perspective

While we have responded here primarily in relation to the status of women and girls within the UK, we are involved in a process towards CSW59 at which Beijing+20 will be celebrated and the global review discussed, and many of us are also involved in the Post-2015 agenda. We think it is critically important that that agenda is transformative and universal, and we appreciate that overseas the UK is an important and supportive advocate for human rights. Since there is a strong impetus to end with a rights-based set of goals and targets, this is vital work and we urge the Government not to relax its support for women's rights, and in particular sexual health and reproductive rights, to be at the centre of the new agenda.

Key Recommendations

The report as a whole represents the key areas where there is general agreement and little dissent. We include here an overview of our key recommendations, both overall and for each of the 12 critical areas of concern identified in the BPFA.

Overall

We welcome a number of achievements towards women's advancement and gender equality noted in the UK Government report and encourage them to accelerate the implementation of the BPFA in the following areas:

- The four nations of the UK are no more separate in seeking to tackle the problems that are due to women's inequality with men than that the UK is separate from the rest of the world. We strongly support the rights-based work of the Government overseas such as the FCO's programme to stop sexual violence in conflict and DFID's placing of gender at the centre of its development aid. We also welcome the support given to the establishing of UN Women together with the UK's annual high level of contribution by successive governments. And we highly value the UK Government's commitment to a rights-based approach to women's equality in the Post-2015 agenda. But gender inequality is endemic everywhere. It may be understood as both a cause and a driver of failing economic systems that benefit oppressive global syndicates and conglomerates, increase female poverty, conflict and violence and support a culture steeped in misogyny. The BPFA sought step changes across all areas of human endeavour. We recommend the same resources as we employ overseas be applied domestically within the UK to invest in a culture that rejects all forms of misogyny.
- The UK Government and those in Scotland and Wales have developed welcome equalities strategies, including specific strategies aimed at addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG). In Northern Ireland, the strategy was gender neutral and unhelpful. A clear lead is required together with training of officials on gender equality practice.
- Further resources and high priority be given to the prevention of all forms of VAWG. Taking the excellent *This is ABUSE* campaign into schools, as recommended by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, would be a useful step.
- Programmes to increase employment by changes in flexible working and parental leave, efforts to reduce quality child care costs, and the appointment of a Women's Business Council, are all welcome. While employment is a useful route out of poverty, it is limited when low pay, zero contract hours, the over burdening of women in caring - unpaid work - and other disadvantages keep women poor. We ask that those whose preference is to stay at home to care for their children be supported so to do.
- Efforts to increase the representation of women in decision-making positions is evidenced by the voluntary executive search programme to get more women appointed to boards of major quoted UK companies. This has met with some success, although the overall goal of 25% female representation is too low. In Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland the appointment of women to public boards is also being examined. We recommend that the goal be raised to at least 40%, and 'temporary special measures', such as quotas, be applied should voluntarism fail.
- We are pleased the UK Government has passed legislation permitting political parties to employ women-only short lists for nominations for candidates, but this measure will expire in 2015 unless the Government continues the period to 2030. Women in Parliaments, councils and other key positions of power and influence are

central to advancing women's status. We urge the Government to extend this measure and encourage such powers to be extended to devolved administrations.

We recommend:

- a more coherent and integrated approach to the whole arena of gender inequality. This must include a commitment, when voluntary approaches are not working, to using 'temporary special measures' as proposed by the CEDAW Committee, as well as positive action;
- greater engagement with civil society and resources for women's organisations to involve women, including younger and more diverse women, in developing policy and setting agendas for engagement with governments throughout the UK;
- ensuring that women's organisations are proactively funded and commissioned to provide expert services overall and in specific areas such as VAWG and healthcare;
- strengthening the key departments working on gender equality such as the Government Equalities Office, which works to bring international commitments to fruition in domestic policy;
- in relation to the increasing poverty of women and their children, who are unfairly and disproportionately impacted by austerity measures, the application of routine and careful gender impact assessment with regular reviews of the impact of policies that cut spending and public services and the impact of raising taxes;
- in order to provide the necessary data and information, strengthening the disaggregation of statistics to inform the complex analysis needed for gendered policies across the ranges of age, marital status, family form, socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion and belief;
- in relation to rural women, government in each nation should require broadband services to be delivered to minimise isolation and increase life-long learning while enabling access to paperless systems of benefits and other communications. Governments should also subsidise transport to enable integration, as well as to allow access of emergency and health services;
- in relation to a culture that increasingly sexualizes not only children but also women and encourages easy access to pornographic images that overwhelmingly degrade women,
 - making education for young people, including PSHE, compulsory in all schools, with an emphasis on understanding gender inequality and a strong focus on the meaning of consent, including with regard to modern technologies;
 - making it a requirement that all technologies that profit through the use of porn to be sold with access to such sites switched to *off*
- Given the links between the porn industry and the buying and selling of women's bodies and of trafficking both across borders and within the UK of women and girls for sexual exploitation including prostitution, we note that most women's organizations working in the field of violence against women in the UK are strongly in favour of the 'Nordic Model'. This model penalizes the buyers of women's bodies and those that profit from this and decriminalizes and supports those involved in prostitution and the sex industry. We note the support given to this model recently by the Northern Ireland Government and by the Westminster Parliament APPG report as well as by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe and encourage this approach for the whole of the UK.

The Critical Areas of Concern - 1. Recommendations

Critical Area A: Women and Poverty

- A gendered analysis of poverty, and welfare reforms, needs to be embedded in Government policy making. The impact of fiscal policy on women must be properly taken into account if their poverty is not to be deepened.
- This requires undertaking regular equality impact assessments to ensure that those who are most vulnerable, including women and particularly women with intersecting disadvantages, are not additionally burdened by policies that cut access to public service and benefits; and
- Measures implemented to relieve such poverty.
- Remove barriers to women's entry to the labour market; public funding of high quality childcare and retraining opportunities following periods out of the labour market are fundamental to tackling women's poverty and must be considered an investment in economic growth.

Critical Area B: Education and Training of Women

- Teaching about gender equality and VAWG, international human and women's rights conventions, and indeed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, should form part of the core curriculum in schools;
- Gender equality and the impact of stereotypes, together with information about all forms of VAWG, should be part of the curriculum in teacher training;
- Provide access to English-language classes for migrant women, enabling them to overcome the language barrier which acts as a significant obstacle to accessing further training and employment.

Critical Area C: Women and Health

- Ensure, in each nation, there is clarity that women-only services and spaces are lawful and necessary.
- Support and adequately resource training programmes for agencies to build trust and to provide the services they need with South Asian and other minority women, such as Roma, migrant and BME women, transgender and LBT women, and women with disabilities who have specific needs.

Within the context of Northern Ireland:

- Lead change so that women in Northern Ireland will not continue to be denied the fundamental rights to reproductive health which accessible to women in the rest of the UK. Abortion should be legal and available to women in all four countries of the UK. This includes implementing repeated CEDAW Committee recommendations.
- Recognise that Northern Ireland is still dealing with the health legacy of 30 years of conflict, and supporting provision of services for continuing health - especially mental health - problems.

Critical Area D: Violence against Women

- Ratify without further delay and implement the Council of Europe Convention on Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention).
- Require local authorities to ring-fence funding for Refuges and Rape Crisis Centres; increase the Rape Support Fund.
- Meet the acute need for training and education of all professionals involved.
- Reverse the cuts to legal aid and provide relief from the stringent proof of abuse for victims of violence. Access to justice is vital for all victims of VAWG and specified by the CEDAW Committee in its Concluding Observations (2013).

Critical Area E: Women and Armed Conflict

- Implement UN SCR 1325 and subsequent elaborations, ensuring women are involved in decision-making for peace-building and the prevention and resolution of conflict as also called for by Rashida Manjoo, UN Special Rapporteur on VAW, especially with reference to Northern Ireland.
- Build a data-base so that qualified women are known and listed and can be appointed in a timely fashion.
- Implement and report regularly on aspects of the UK National Action Plan.

Critical Area F: Women and the Economy

- A gender equality impact assessment of the programme of public funding cuts should be carried out alongside an assessment of economic strategy from a gender equality perspective.
- Recognise that progress on the gender pay gap, always slow, has now reversed, and take decisive action to close it by working with industry, trade unions and women's organisations.
- Invest in a national system of universal child care.
- Reduce fees for tribunal hearings of abuse or discriminatory dismissals and lengthen the time bars, as these affect access to justice.

Critical Area G: Women in Power and Decision-Making

- The tackling of stereotypes as a major culture change programme.
- We applaud the Government's 'Access to Elected Office' campaign, which offered grants to help disabled women into political office together with guidance for political parties regarding the legal requirement to provide reasonable adjustments. The implementation of similar programmes for BME women would go towards implementing a recommendation by the CEDAW Committee.
- Maintain permissive legislation allowing political parties to take positive action on gender equality.

Critical Area H: Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women

- Implement gender mainstreaming across all government departments according to the clear definitions in the BPPA setting out the twin track of women-specific measures and methodologies such as gender budgeting, gender impact assessment of policies and the inclusion of women/civil society in the processes.
- Undertake training and education of all officials and raise awareness and understanding of continuing gender inequality and the cross-cutting need for change.
- Ensure differences across the devolved nations are understood, and resource women and their organisations in each nation to assist in developing an architecture for working cohesively across the emerging quasi-federal constitutional settlement in the UK.
- Properly resource the UK Government's own gender machinery, and develop a more sophisticated mechanism for listening to the independent opinion of women.

Critical Area I: Human Rights of Women

- It is imperative to recognize the human rights of all women including refugee and asylum women who were omitted from the UK Government review. We urge the UK to bring in a form of guidelines/practice direction for immigration judges on dealing with gender issues
- We recommend that application of the International Protocol on preventing sexual violence in conflict be applied to women seeking asylum, including training for interviewers and interpreters on trauma and sexual violence.

- The UK Government, far from repealing the Human Rights Act (HRA), must ensure that vital rights and mechanisms contained in the Act, which provide important protections for women and girls, will remain part of UK law.

Critical Area J: Women and the Media

- We support the recommendations made by women’s organizations to the Leveson Enquiry, including:
 - effective regulation of the press, overseen by an independent third party;
 - A code must be in line with equalities legislation and international obligations on equality that the UK has signed, including strong rules regarding sexism and gender discrimination;
 - journalistic guideline recommendations in line with those produced by Zero Tolerance and Violence Against Women Prevention Scotland.
- We seek greater representation of women of all ages and from a range of backgrounds and abilities in all aspects of media production and representation, if necessary by temporary special measures and positive action.

Critical Area K: Women and the Environment

- Support research to understand the gender differential impacts, of climate change.
- Continue to encourage and invest in the education and training of girls and women in STEM subjects to provide the necessary expertise to engage at every level in environmental policies.
- Provide funding for women’s entrepreneurial work in green technology.

Critical Area L: The Girl Child

- Culture change must include serious investment in destroying the misogyny and objectification in particular of the girl child.
- The Girl Summit is a welcome example of listening to the goals of girls themselves. We urge the Government to establish mechanisms to include their voices in policy development.
- Girls and boys must be taught about gender inequality and sexual consent in schools to counteract the pervasive sexism that drives women’s lifelong inequality.
- Support and train professionals providing services, or pursuing criminal convictions, to engage with the families as well as the girls and young women involved in forced marriage or subjected to FGM, including those with learning and other disabilities and from all backgrounds with sensitivity while insisting on maintaining a gendered perspective.

The Critical Areas of Concern - 2. Discussion

There are a number of issues under each critical area that we believe demand considerable further evaluation and discussion. In this document, however, we focus on the most urgent and pressing.

Critical Area A: Women and Poverty

Globally, the population is ageing. This is of considerable importance in the UK but older women are barely mentioned in successive Government reports. Women in the UK have lower income than men over their lifetimes; they also have lower savings, capital assets, and pensions. This is partly due to a labour market that is segregated both horizontally and vertically by gender, with women disproportionately represented in the low-paid sectors such as caring, cleaning, and catering, and overrepresented in the lower levels in other sectors. Last year the gender pay gap increased for the first time in five years and now stands at 19.1%.¹⁰ The gender pension gap is even larger. Currently the average for the European Union is 39%.¹¹ Pensions are of particular concern for transgender women, who “have been struggling to get their gender status accepted for the purpose of pension benefits”¹² resulting in an inability to access pensions. Across all women, two thirds of pensions who live in relative poverty are women. This is partially because there are more women pensioners than male pensioners overall, but is also due to the low income levels of women while they are in the workforce.¹³

Northern Ireland research by the New Policy Institute published in March 2014 highlighted that between 2007/8 and 2011/2 the average (median) income in Northern Ireland fell by almost 10% compared with 7% for the UK as a whole. Poverty rates in Northern Ireland are also higher than those found in the rest of Ireland based upon the before housing costs measure from 2011, with 21% of people in Northern Ireland in poverty compared to 15% in the Republic of Ireland.

A key issue is women’s disproportionate responsibility for unpaid caring, for sick and disabled family members, child- and eldercare. 58% of carers are women¹⁴ and 45% have given up work altogether because of care responsibilities. 42% of women, compared to only 12% of men, are in part time work.¹⁵ This has long-term impacts on women’s pensions.

The UK’s childcare is the most expensive in the OECD. We agree with the OECD recommendation:

*The high costs of childcare continue to be a major constraint to many mothers working full-time. OECD projections show that by 2030, if the share of women working reached the same level as for men, annual growth rates in GDP per capita would rise by 0.5% in the UK. The boost to economic growth would be even higher if women’s working hours increased too. The government should facilitate the increase of working hours among women, and especially mothers, starting with more affordable high-quality childcare services.*¹⁶

An analysis of national employment data and a survey of low paid women shows that since the start of the crisis in 2008, 826,000 women have moved into low paid, insecure work; female under-employment has nearly doubled, and 371,000 women have moved into self-employment, typically very low paid.¹⁷

1 in 4 women are on low pay, and the value of pay for this group is declining in real terms; the Retail Price Index-adjusted national minimum wage is, in real-terms, the lowest it has been since 2003.¹⁸ 56% of all domiciliary care workers are on zero-hours contracts¹⁹ - 80%

of jobs in the care sector are staffed by women. Overall, 1 in 8 low paid women now say they are on a ‘zero hours’ contract.²⁰

In Northern Ireland over 51% of female employees work in three industries that largely make up the public sector. Public sector employment is undergoing rationalization. Without such substantial female employment in the public sector it is possible the gender pay gap in Northern Ireland would be significantly wider.

Since 2010 the Government has cut welfare benefits and local authority (LAs) budgets. Recent changes in welfare mean that almost all previously separate cash benefits will now be paid in one single payment through Universal Credit (UC). In most cases this will go to the man of the house, decreasing women’s financial independence, particularly if they have an abusive or controlling partner - a concern expressed by the CEDAW Committee in its Concluding Observation to the UK hearing (July, 2013).²¹ Benefit payments previously made weekly or fortnightly will be paid monthly in arrears. Child benefit, which was the only benefit to go directly to the woman, is now means-tested which means that women in abusive relationships have lost what was often their only way of having limited access to independent finance. Women often manage household budgets, receiving small payments throughout the month which spreads their finances. Consequentially, many will fall into debt. Some will rely on payday loans, which carry dangerously high interest rates.

Applications for some benefits will be made online and claimants must manage their own claim. Many do not have access to a computer or the IT skills to complete the necessary applications. There is, furthermore, no guarantee that assistance will be made available. Broadband connections are poor in the majority of rural areas across the country. This is particularly marked in Scotland, in which rural areas make up 94% of the geography and 18% of the overall population. This puts rural women who rely on welfare benefits at a significant disadvantage. The situation for Northern Ireland is similar with many government departments going ‘paperless’ resulting in an inability to access services.

Failure to comply with ‘work related requirements’ means claimants are ‘sanctioned’.²² The Scottish Parliament’s report²³ criticised the serious financial hardship caused by a significant increase in sanctions, including to lone parents - a group consisting overwhelmingly of women. Fig. 1 below shows that sanctions to women have increased by 76% in Scotland alone; as the sanctions regime is UK-wide this is likely to be replicated elsewhere.

Figure 1²⁴

<i>Numbers sanctioned for Jobseekers Allowance (Scotland)</i>					
	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012²⁵</i>	<i>2013</i>
<i>Disabled people</i>	8,026	10,239	9,677	11,616	13,128
<i>Lone parents</i>	476	1,042	1,635	2,576	3,157
<i>Women</i>	7,914	9,832	10,034	12,276	13,993

We agree with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that “the threat of destitution is a poorly evidenced and high-risk way of trying to influence the behaviour of some of the poorest people in the country”²⁶ (among whom women are overrepresented).

A rise in the use of foodbanks coincided with these welfare reforms. Last year, nearly a million people were given three days’ worth of emergency food through the network of Trussell Trust food banks alone; the main single reason given was benefit-related.²⁷

The Government’s strategy of rebalancing the budget through public spending cuts, rather than tax increases, has had a disproportionate effect on women. Since 2010, men

contributed a net £3.047 billion (21%) towards the deficit reduction and women £11.628 billion (79%).²⁸ Tax concessions benefited men: 75% of those who did *not* gain from personal allowance increases were women. The transferable tax allowance will give a £411 million to men (84%) and only £84 million to women (16%).

Since women depend more on non-employment income than men, these cuts have a disproportionate impact on them and on children. The proportion of children living in poverty was 1 in 3 in 1998, just after the UK signed up to the BPPA. Today, 30 per cent of children in Britain are living in poverty.²⁹ The UK has one of the worst rates of child poverty in the industrialised world. This is inextricably linked to women's poverty; 40% of poor children live in a household headed by a lone parent.³⁰ 75% of disabled women were already living in poverty in 2010;³¹ with the impact of the current benefit cuts, the levels of poverty are likely to increase. Public sector job cuts are likely to have a greater impact on disabled women as the numbers of disabled women employed in the public sector increased by 24% in between 1998 and 2003, compared with 11% of disabled men.³²

Critical Area B: Education and Training of Women

As the Government report indicates, girls are doing better at school and university. However, this masks a number of concerns regarding the equality of outcome for girls, including the intersection of class and gender.³³ The gendered choices they make in education and training lead to a lifetime of lower pay. Positive action to prevent gender bias in the choice of subjects at school and active encouragement of young women into non-traditional areas is the starting point to tackle this. More broadly, education offers a critical opportunity to teach both girls and boys about gender equality. At present, teaching about gender equality, international human and women's rights conventions, and indeed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, do not form part of the core curriculum in schools. We recommend that they should. Moreover, the culture in UK schools is strongly sexist, reflecting the social and media context in which they exist, and this needs to be decisively tackled. In particular sexism in teaching, including in the content of curriculum topics, demonstrates the need for a gendered lens to be applied by all teachers at every stage including the nursery. We recommend gender equality and the impact of stereotypes, together with information about all forms of VAWG, should be part of the curriculum in teacher training.

70% of girls and young women aged 11 -21 years³⁴ say they have experienced sexual harassment at school, including sexual taunts and unwanted touching. A similar number of 16-18-year-olds say sexual name-calling such as "slut" or "slag" towards girls at school happens daily or a few times every week. Just under a third have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school, a similar number have seen sexual pictures on mobile phones at school a few times a month or more. However, 24% said that their teachers never challenge these things.³⁵ We believe that this systematic harassment is one of the ways in which girls are 'policed' by boys to abide by gender stereotypes and (among other things) this discourages them from taking subjects where boys dominate.

We are dismayed that violence against girls is not covered in the girl section of the UK Government Beijing + 20 Shadow Report; however we note that the Government states that they are concerned about the high level of sexual harassment in schools. We are not aware that the *This is ABUSE* campaign has addressed this issue as the report claims; the Discussion Guide makes it clear that the focus of the campaign (which we strongly support) is limited to abuse within relationships,³⁶ and during her recent visit to the UK, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls recommended that the *This is ABUSE* campaign should in fact be extended to schools.

51% of girls are deterred from physical activity by their experiences of school sport.³⁷ The main deterrent was body image, with 75% of girls agreeing that they are self-conscious of

their bodies; some reported sexism when playing sport. There is also evidence that Muslim girls find dress requirements difficult. Although their religion encourages fitness, Muslim girls are expected to undertake sport only in single sex groups. The figures are not disaggregated by religion but 12.5% of Asian women do enough exercise each week to benefit their health (3 x 30 minutes), as compared to 18.8% of white women.³⁸ This clearly demonstrates that there is a need for interventions to be developed to ensure that Muslim women specifically have the opportunity to participate in sport and physical activity, and also to gain from the associated health benefits that being active brings”.³⁹

In the UK there is no requirement that schools' expenditure on sport benefit girls and boys equally. Using an example from the USA, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 requires that US schools receiving state funds must provide female students with equal opportunities to participate in educational programmes, including Physical Education. Since Title IX was passed, the number of girls participating in secondary school athletics in the USA has increased from 300,000 to nearly 3 million—from 7% to nearly 41%.⁴⁰ The Culture Media and Sport Committee of the UK Parliament recently heard evidence that funding in the UK was given primarily to boys' sports in schools and received a recommendation that an amendment be made to schools' Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010, to be monitored by the Youth Sport Trust. We agree.

As in other parts of the UK there is a strong emphasis in Northern Ireland's economic development strategy on science, technology, engineering, mathematics and related areas (STEM), but little has changed in terms of gender segregation over the last fifteen years; only 9% of apprentices in STEM subjects are female. In 2013, 2% of programme led apprentices in government-defined 'economically important' areas are female.⁴¹ At higher education level 74% of Computer Science students are male; 80% in Engineering and Technology, and 70% in Architecture, Building and Planning.⁴² It has been acknowledged by the Government that given the dominance of men in the above areas that most of the growth sectors identified for the Northern Ireland economy “will be heavily populated by male employees”.⁴³

There is a high level of gender segregation between apprenticeship sectors. Although still strongly male-dominated, the degree of this segregation improved between 2003-2009 in construction and plumbing, but worsened in ICT and engineering. Men dominate in highly paid sectors, while women are overrepresented in lower paid sectors such as hairdressing and health and social care. Additionally, women were less likely to get a contract of employment due to scarcity of the apprenticeship positions. This is exacerbated for women of minority ethnic groups, as less than 7% of all apprentices are non-white. Women were also more likely to be employed in contracts of fewer than 30 hours a week (27% as compared with 11% of men), and more likely to not receive pay.⁴⁴

The Scottish Government guarantees a place in education or training for all 16 to 19-year-olds. Scotland's Modern Apprenticeship programme will give 30,000 young people a year the opportunity to achieve a high level vocational qualification while working.⁴⁵ However, women continue to predominate in business and administration, children's care, learning and development, customer service, hairdressing and barbering, health and social care, hospitality, retail and travel Services. Women are seriously underrepresented in automotive, construction, ICT and telecommunications and plumbing.⁴⁶

The level of fees for Higher Education in some parts of the UK is off-putting to many who do not want to incur more than £30,000 of debt. This is a substantial barrier to the kind of education-related social mobility that was achieved in the 60s to mid 80s, particularly for girls and young women, who earn less as graduates than men.⁴⁷ Students in Scotland do not pay tuition fees whilst the fees in Wales are capped.⁴⁸ The impact of these different policies within the UK should be researched for their impact on women and achieving the BPPA gender equality goals.

The language barrier for migrant women acts as a significant obstacle to accessing further training and employment. Greater access to English-language classes would go some way to removing this barrier.

Critical Area C: Women and Health

Health services in the UK are free at the point of access and paid for through general taxation. The NHS is strongly supported by the whole community and particularly women; it has huge benefits for women and the implementation of the BPFA.

At the same time, restructuring of the NHS has increased discrepancies in services across the four nations and at regional level leading to a 'post code lottery'. For example, in England responsibility for commissioning services has been devolved to local level. This means, for example, that patients in England have to pay prescription charges for medicines but those in the rest of the UK do not. Similarly, in Scotland, free Personal and Nursing Care is a legal entitlement for people aged 65 or over who have been assessed as having personal care needs.⁴⁹ The Community Care and Health (Scotland) Act 2002 sets out a detailed list of such personal care tasks, which cannot be charged for. This includes: assistance with personal hygiene, eating and drinking, immobility problems, management of medication and personal safety. However, outside Scotland, people must make a means-tested contribution to these costs; as women generally live longer than men this has a greater impact on them.

There is a lack of gender awareness (and the BPFA commitments) among local commissioners and this means that many local Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (which set the framework for the services to be commissioned) fail to prioritise women's specific service needs. For example, counselling and long-term therapeutic support for women who have been subject to rape and sexual assault is inadequately funded by the NHS despite its inclusion in the formally recognised pathways of care.⁵⁰ NHS England recognises that:

The health needs of victims include the physical health consequences of sexual violence and for rape, a risk of pregnancy... contraction of sexually transmitted infections and HIV and... longer-term health issues such as increased rates of chronic illnesses, poor perceived health and increased use of medical services. The psychological consequences are linked to profound long-term health issues with one third of rape survivors going on to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, relationship problems and longer term psychological needs, mental illness and an increased risk of suicide for abused children when they reach their mid twenties.⁵¹

The recent report of 1400 girls being subject to sexual exploitation in Rotherham reiterated the crucial importance of independent specialist sexual violence services, yet most continue to operate without stable funding from NHS Commissioners. In the same vein, health services for reconstructive surgery following FGM, and for victims of domestic violence and other forms of VAWG are still not part of mainstream provision. Demand outstrips supply for these specialist services, and Rape Crisis Centres for example, routinely close their waiting lists toward the end of a contract because they cannot meet demand, meaning that women are without services (for example, in London) during this period.

As the Women's Resource Centre recommended in its shadow report to the CEDAW Committee last year, we believe women's health and social care needs must form an integral part of the Department of Health's strategic framework, specifically through statutory guidance to Clinical Commissioning Groups on how to proactively fund and commission from the women's voluntary sector.

There is no acknowledgement of population ageing in the Government's report, yet the BPFA explicitly refers to the needs and concerns of older women and CEDAW now has a special recommendation on this group.⁵² It is a singular absence to have no mention of dementia or other mental health issues that older women experience.

Some services are rationed or otherwise restricted; for example, fertility treatment. Reproductive healthcare services are often inaccessible for disabled women who are assumed not to have need; healthcare providers may question disabled women's right to have children, even suggesting abortion or sterilisation, particularly if the disabled woman is said to have any degree of learning difficulties. The effects of sexuality-based discrimination on the sexual and reproductive health of disabled LBT women are equally significant. Access to health services for transgender women is immensely difficult due to significant under-funding of gender-confirmation surgery,⁵³ resulting in long waiting times, complex referral processes and limited services available.⁵⁴ Moreover, reports of discrimination even at Gender Identity Clinics are common, and engagement with the NHS for non-gender related services is frequently traumatic.⁵⁵ There is a lack of training and sensitivity in health services for minority groups including BME women, lesbians, transgender women, and Muslim women. Mental health issues go undiagnosed due to inadequate cultural understanding; this has been exacerbated by cuts to funding to mental health services, particularly specialist services. Rural women are particularly affected by limited choices.

Gender specific health services, including mental health services, are important as women have different needs to men. Gender and ethnicity also intersect to produce different needs, as do transgender status for transgender women and sexuality for lesbian and bisexual women. For example, there has been an increase in self-harm amongst South Asian women as compared to other ethnicities and men. The group most at risk are young adult women (18-24 years) although studies of teenagers have shown no difference with their white counterparts. This suggests that social reasons such as the pressure of conforming to the expectations of their communities, racism, stereotyping of Asian women and the concept of "izzat" (honour) are at its root. South Asian women can feel apprehensive about mainstream services and unable to trust the providers of these services.⁵⁶ Rates of breakdowns in mental health are higher among young women and men with learning disabilities.⁵⁷ Although not disaggregated by gender, 84% of transgender people have thought about committing suicide, whilst 48% have actually made an attempt to end their own life at some point.⁵⁸ Work needs to be carried out to help agencies build trust with South Asian women, transgender women and other minority women, such as Roma, migrant and BME women who also have specific needs.

Despite hotly contested policy differences in structure, targets, competition, patient choice and the use of non-NHS providers, no one country is emerging as a consistent front-runner on health system performance.⁵⁹

The NHS in Wales has a responsibility to get the maximum value and clinical benefit out of a fixed, publicly-funded budget.⁶⁰ In order to achieve this it is essential that local services are based on need and planned accordingly. The seven Local Health Boards (LHBs) in Wales now plan, secure and deliver healthcare services in their areas, replacing the 22 LHBs and the 7 NHS Trusts which together performed these functions in the past.⁶¹

In Northern Ireland, the Health and Social Care Board is responsible for commissioning services, resource management and performance management and service improvement. It works to identify and meet the needs of the Northern Ireland population through its five Local Commissioning Groups which cover the same geographical areas as the Health and Social Care Trusts. Issues regarding the proximity to services, particularly emergency services, will continue to have a greater effect on the rural population if the trend for centralisation that has shaped delivery models for services such as health continues. In some areas already there is up to a 35mile trip to access emergency services.

Although rural Scotland registers 18% of the total population in Scotland, it accounts for 94% of the landmass in Scotland. This reflects the dispersed nature of the population in rural areas. In contrast the rest of Scotland accounts for 82% of the population of Scotland but only 6% of the landmass. There is similar pressure on services in Wales, where there is also a geographically dispersed population and topographically challenging landscape. In these areas, cohesive service provision is difficult, and women find it harder to access health services. Rural women particularly suffer from a lack of choice of service provider.

Women in Northern Ireland do not have the same access to abortion as women in the rest of the UK. The legislation governing abortion in Northern Ireland has its roots in the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, which criminalises any woman who has an abortion. There is no provision in Northern Ireland for abortions to be legally carried out on grounds of rape, incest and foetal abnormality. Women in Northern Ireland are forced to travel outside the jurisdiction for abortions which causes severe economic and emotional hardship. The UK Government has resisted calls by the CEDAW Committee (in 1999, 2008 and 2013) to address this abuse of women's human rights. NGOs in Northern Ireland have submitted an application for an Inquiry into reproductive rights under the CEDAW Optional Protocol. In its 2013 Concluding Observations the CEDAW Committee asked the UK Government to report on the Committee's recommendation on abortion by November 2014. In May 2014 the High Court in England ruled that Northern Ireland women are not entitled to free NHS abortions in England. On 8 October 2014 the Minister for Justice in Northern Ireland announced that the Department of Justice is to begin a 'public consultation' on amending the criminal law on abortion (this refers to the issuing of a document which the public could respond to rather than a scientific survey of public opinion or a referendum). The public will be asked for opinions on possible changes to law in cases of lethal foetal abnormality and rape. The suggestion in the consultation paper is that the law should be changed with regard to cases of lethal foetal abnormality; it does not state this with regard to rape or incest. The Minister's statement that "*this consultation paper in no way represents proposals for abortion on demand* [emphasis added]. It is about considering legislative changes in two specific sets of circumstances." We consider that this demonstrates that women in Northern Ireland will continue to be denied fundamental rights to reproductive health accessible to women in the rest of the UK.

Northern Ireland is also still dealing with the health legacy of 25 years of conflict. Incidence of depression is approximately 20% higher than the rest of the UK. Depression affects about 7% of our population at any one time (about 100,000 people in Northern Ireland) and it is estimated that for every one person who is affected directly another five people are affected indirectly.

Critical Area D: Violence Against Women

We welcome the fact that the UK Government has a violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategy (which now includes women seeking asylum) and all other national governments in the UK have something similar.

However, this falls short of a comprehensive, cross-government strategy, bringing together a coordinated response across the whole of the UK as required by the BPF. The UK strategy has almost no budget allocation, does not include trafficking, and there is little reference to prostitution or to sexual harassment. There was no reference to violence older women may experience in the different settings where they receive care and support, or to neglect or financial exploitation. Coverage across the four nations varies.

Scotland has been proactive at taking forward work to tackle VAWG, including protection, provision of support and services for those who have or are experiencing violence, and measures for prevention are cited as national priorities. The Scottish Government and

COSLA (the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) are currently developing a national strategy on all forms of VAWG.

The Northern Ireland Executive adopted a strategy '*Tackling Violence at Home: A strategy for addressing domestic violence and abuse in Northern Ireland*' in 2005, with the latest Action Plan on Tackling Domestic, Sexual Violence and Abuse 2012-2013.⁶² VAWG continues to be a significant problem in Northern Ireland with evidence of increasing prevalence and of continued deficiencies in policy and services. Domestic violence abuse incidences are rising. In 2011/12 there were 553 reported rapes, the highest number since the current system of data collection began in 2004/05. Official sources estimate that up to 80% of sex crimes are not reported. Government has consulted on a strategy to stop domestic and sexual violence and assault, however, it is not a specific VAWG strategy; the consultation draft was said to be 'gender neutral' when subject to equality assessment, and has no budget allocation. NGOs have made submissions to this effect to the consulting Departments.

The Welsh Government has its own strategy and was due to introduce a Bill aimed at ending Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence.⁶³ That has now changed to the Gender-based Violence, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Bill, which uses a problematic definition entirely unrelated to international or regional law that excludes many forms of violence against women. Following protests, however, the Welsh Government has recognised that gender based violence has a disproportionate impact on women and girls, and has announced that there will be an explicit requirement on the face of the Bill to address VAWG.⁶⁴

As the Government's report shows, VAWG in the UK is high: according to a March 2014 EU-wide survey, the UK has the joint fifth highest rate of physical and sexual violence (44%) in the European Union.⁶⁵ An estimated 1.2 million women suffered domestic abuse and over 330,000 women were sexually assaulted from 2012-2013.⁶⁶

This demonstrates the importance of ratifying and implementing the Council of Europe Convention on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention); the Government has signed but has yet to ratify. We call on the Government to ratify without further delay.

The CEDAW Committee highlighted the following areas during the State Party Report in 2013, and we share their concerns:

- The impact of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (2012) and restriction of women's access to legal aid and conditions regarding proof of abuse for victims of violence.⁶⁷ The Committee noted with concern that these limitations could push women, particularly ethnic minority women, into informal community arbitration systems, including faith-based tribunals;
- The need for public awareness campaigns, and intensifying efforts to train police in particular, to eliminate prejudices concerning the credibility of victims of domestic violence;
- Implementation of laws on female genital mutilation (FGM);
- The lack of a comprehensive national framework on trafficking, and weaknesses in the current referral systems.

A racial analysis is often applied to violence and sexual exploitation, and this means that VAWG, within and across ethnic communities, is often not addressed by police or social services for so-called 'cultural' reasons. While there has been intense publicity over the grooming and sexual exploitation of white girls by Asian men, serious sexual and other forms of violence experienced by ethnic minority women and girls escape attention, and the much greater prevalence of violence by white men against white women and girls is ignored.

The implementation of the BPFA is jeopardised by lack of understanding that women's inequality is both a cause and consequence of VAWG, and indeed that it is a gendered phenomenon at all. This 'gender-neutral' approach has led to cuts in funding for services, but, perversely, an increase in men's services at the same time that women services are being reduced. This is despite the overwhelming evidence that most service users are in fact women. There is severe pressure on women-only services to provide support for men, despite lack of demand and lack of evidence that women's services are best placed to meet men's needs. Again perversely, women-only services are being refused funding on the grounds that they discriminate against male service users. The lack of resources to support women and girls in rural and isolated communities is particularly acute. Refuges are under-funded and under-resourced - especially in rural areas. Funding of the domestic and sexual violence sector was cut by one third from 2010-12. In 2013 there were 21 fewer specialist refuge providers, and a loss of 71 specialist non-refuge services alongside an increase of 24 generic services. 47% of services for black and minority ethnic (BME) women have experienced significant loss of funding. At a time of loss across the women's sector, services to support men have increased in number: there are 29 additional services for men in 2013 than in 2011, leading to a total of 146 services. All regions have lost children's services. The Jay report into the Rotherham abuse repeatedly discusses the lack of resources as one of the key factors in this service delivery decline.⁶⁸

In 2008, Ealing Council cut funding to Southall Black Sisters, arguing that their specialist services to black women excluded women from the majority community and was therefore in breach of equality law.⁶⁹ Despite that fact that this was found to be unlawful, we have extensive anecdotal evidence that local service commissioners require women-only services to include men in order to be eligible for funding. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has repeatedly issued guidance indicating that this is a misreading of the Equality Act and that specialist services may be appropriate and necessary in order to achieve equality of outcome. Local commissioners also increasingly package services that are put out to open tender in such a way as to exclude the independent women's sector from bidding: for example, by amalgamating a range of services e.g. advocacy together with forensic services (that women's organisations are unable to provide); or by requiring the bidding organisation to have a certain level of income/turnover that small women's organisations are unable to comply with. This means, for example, that refuge services are increasingly being provided by generic housing businesses and removed from the independent third sector, which also means they are no longer user-led. Women with specific needs (disability, minority community, religious etc) are particularly disadvantaged as funding moves towards bigger 'one-size-fits-all' models.

We call on the Government to reverse the drastic cuts to women-only services and the movement of funding for services for women and girls experiencing violence away from user-led specialist women's organisations into the private sector and statutory agencies. This continues apace despite high-level recognition, including in the Istanbul Convention and the EU Directive on victims, that independent non-statutory services are an essential part of the State's response to VAWG. This is particularly important while women lack trust in the criminal justice system to the point where 85% of them do not report rape to the police.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women has expressed her concern that:

...the current austerity measures are having a disproportionate impact, not only in the specific provision of violence against women services, but more generally, on other cross-cutting areas affecting women, such as poverty and unemployment, which are contributory factors to violence against women and girls.⁷⁰

She recognises that:

... women from black and minority ethnic communities, women belonging to the LGBTI community, and women with disabilities, are further affected by these cutbacks. These women are, for many reasons, often linked to entrenched discriminatory practices in the political, social and economic spheres, and are more likely to depend on benefits and on support from an increasingly under-resourced non-profit sector. Unfortunately, it is precisely the specialized services catering for these women, which are being mostly affected, even more so than the mainstream violence against women and girls' services, in many instances.⁷¹

Women with mental health issues or learning disabilities are not taken seriously in rape or domestic violence cases.⁷² Research shows that more than 70% of women with 'developmental disabilities' are sexually assaulted, a rate that is 50 per cent higher than women that do not have 'developmental disabilities'.⁷³ These rapes may be included as 'hate crime' and hence not counted. Out of 151 cases of rape, vulnerabilities, including complex needs, were 'frequently identified' - mental health being the biggest single category at 40% of cases where information was available.⁷⁴ The conviction rate in such cases was significantly lower than the already-low average. There is evidence that victims are specifically targeted because their vulnerabilities make them poor witnesses in court. Rapes in psychiatric institutions were found by the National Patient Safety Agency, but agencies have not been clear about action taken to protect disabled women from rape and sexual assault. Disabled women are particularly vulnerable when an abusive partner is providing 'care'. Despite this disproportionate impact of violence, neglect and abuse against disabled women and girls, there is only one passing mention of disabled women and girls in the State Action Plan. Mainstream services do not serve disabled women effectively and disabled women cannot easily access support or escape violence.

We are concerned about the rise of so-called "revenge porn", in which explicit images, sometimes obtained by consent, are published without the permission of the subject (usually young women). The harm is exacerbated by victim-blaming. We applaud the Ministry of Justice for considering options to criminalise it. We call for specific legislation to criminalise all parties who share the image knowing that consent has not been obtained, or where a reasonable person would not believe consent has been obtained. The law must require the destruction and deletion of such images, whether digital or in hard copy, and must extend liability to websites that do not comply with requests to remove images. We recommend that education on revenge porn be included in schools, and directed towards potential perpetrators, particularly young men, and focus on the consent issues, rather than shaming young women.

Research of online 'rape porn' found:

- 86% of sites advertised content involving the rape of under 18s;
- 46% of sites advertised rape content involving incest;
- 43% of sites advertised rape content where the victim is unconscious;
- 82% of perpetrators used restraint by force;
- 48% of victims were choked/hit/punched/kicked/slapped/had their hair pulled;
- 77% of victims showed signs of visible distress;
- 68% of victims expressed pain.⁷⁵

We believe pornography and sexualised popular culture form a conducive context for violence against women, contributing to messages about gendered stereotypes and sex which normalise women's suffering and men dominating women.⁷⁶ Such depictions of rape are heavily gendered, with women nearly always the victim and men the perpetrator, and reinforce an extreme version of a culture that removes women's agency from their sexual experiences. Rape porn also frequently reiterates dangerous rape myths, presenting rape

as necessarily violent and aggressive, simultaneously legitimising violence against women and de-legitimising the experiences of women who have been raped without physical force. These rape myths remain one of the key barriers to securing justice for rape survivors; we reiterate Alison Saunders', of the Crown Prosecution Service, call for a public debate and an education campaign focussed on "dispelling [...] myths and stereotypes."⁷⁷

The recent resolution adopted by the European Parliament on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender inequality drew on a number of human rights instruments, called on member states to recognise prostitution as cause and consequence of gender inequality and a violation of women's human rights.⁷⁸ The UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others states that: "prostitution and the accompanying evil of the traffic in persons for the purpose of prostitution are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person."⁷⁹ This therefore defines trafficked prostitution as incompatible with the UN Declaration of Human Rights 1948, which guarantees human dignity and integrity to all.

The BPFA and more recent human rights approaches refer to 'forced' prostitution, but 'force' need not be physical; rather it can describe coercion such as economic coercion, such as a lack of alternative means to support oneself and family. Article 6 of UN General Recommendation 19 on violence against women recognises that poverty and unemployment "force many women, including young girls, into prostitution."⁸⁰ If force or coercion can be exercised as conditions of poverty and unemployment, which disproportionately affect women and girls throughout the world, then gender inequality itself can be described as 'force'. This cannot be described as 'consent' to sell sexual services. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Trafficking noted: "it is rare that one finds a case in which the path to prostitution and/or a person's experience does not involve, at the very least an abuse of power and/or an abuse of vulnerability. Power and vulnerability in this context must be understood to include power disparities based on gender, race, ethnicity and poverty."⁸¹

Research consistently demonstrates the over-representation of women and girls from minority communities in the prostitution system, especially its most abusive contexts. The disparities in socio-economic resources which make selling sex a gendered survival strategy are deepened for minority women and girls. Article 6 of CEDAW requires states to combat and suppress "all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of the prostitution of women." Article 2 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW) recognises "trafficking in women and forced prostitution" as forms of violence against women. While "exploitation of prostitution" is not 'prostitution', those who exploit the circumstances which put women in prostitution (e.g. poverty, discrimination and abuse) are those who buy sexual acts, whose demand fuels the global sex industry. Most women's organisations working on this issue in the UK support the 'Nordic Model' of tackling the harms of prostitution and support the decriminalisation of those who sell sex, in order that support, including sexual and reproductive health care, can be legally and efficiently provided and security and dignity protected. Addressing the safety of women who sell sex is essential. As women involved in prostitution experience disproportionately high levels of sexual and physical violence and emotional abuse, specialised support services must be available and resourced. Emergency staff, including police, must be trained in sensitively and appropriately dealing with such abuse and violence, in order to avoid re-victimising women. A global study found that 89% wanted to stop selling sex, but had no way of doing so. UK research also shows the importance of specialist support for women to exit prostitution.⁸² It is imperative that women have access to economic alternatives.

We were very disappointed that the Government report ignores refugee and asylum seekers. People with 'no recourse to public funds' are those subject to immigration

control; they have no entitlement to welfare benefits, to Home Office asylum support, or to public housing. The Destitution Domestic Violence Concession allows women experiencing domestic violence to get financial assistance.⁸³ However, this only applies to women on a spousal visa, and so the narrowness of the exception still means women are trapped in violent relationships.

There is little or no adherence to gender guidelines for interpretation of the Refugee Convention. Women who have suffered, or are threatened to suffer, gender-based violence because of their ethnic, religious or marital status, or women who are victims of sexual violence in conflict afflicted countries, are denied justice, safety and services. They risk deportation back to countries where they face gender-based violence and even death.

However, despite the fact that sexual violence in conflict, FGM and forced marriage are common reasons for women and girls to claim asylum in the UK, the new provisions in the International Protocol on preventing sexual violence in conflict agreed at the Global Summit and Girl Summit include no parallel commitments for women seeking asylum. We are very concerned that advances in the UK's international work on women's equality, which we very much support, are not reflected in its domestic policy. The provisions would also benefit women seeking asylum, e.g. training for interviewers and interpreters on trauma and on sexual violence.⁸⁴

Women seeking asylum may be detained at any time while their claim is considered or after it has been refused. A high proportion of such women have experienced rape or sexual violence before claiming asylum. We believe detention has no place in the asylum process and that women who seek sanctuary in the UK should not be detained; their cases can be heard while they are living in the community more cheaply and with less trauma.⁸⁵

As stated in the Istanbul Convention signed by the UK in 2012, women have the right to protection from VAWG regardless of their immigration status. We urge the UK Government to ratify this convention.

In communities in the UK, the exploitation and abuse of children, especially girls and women, through grooming, trafficking and prostitution do not, according to a campaign begun in Canada by Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald of Persons Against Non-State Torture, reflect accurately the specific harms some women and girls endure of torture by Non-State Actors.⁸⁶ A campaign to have this recognised is also being pursued in the UK by Elizabeth Gordon.

Critical Area E: Women and Armed Conflict

The UK's Role Internationally

We welcome the work the UK Government has done on UN Security Council Resolution 1325, developing the UK National Action Plan, and undertaking independent analysis of the effectiveness of the consultation on the National Action Plan. We are pleased that individual Ministers, such as former Foreign Secretary William Hague, have been instrumental in trying to keep these issues at the top of the international and national political agenda.

We are concerned that the UK has been party over the last twenty years to many conflicts in which women's rights have not been secured, but have rather been marginalised, despite rhetoric in support (for example in Iraq and Afghanistan). Despite some excellent initiatives, we do not feel there has been an adequate focus and analysis, nor have resources have been sufficiently allocated, for implementing the BPFA in this area. There has been significant movement recently in recognising the need to tackle sexual violence in conflict countries, but when women and girls from those countries seek refuge in the UK

as a result of that violence they encounter serious barriers, and the gender analysis that the Government applies overseas is not applied in its refugee policy.

Initiatives overseas are sometimes undertaken in isolation from related work being done by UN agencies or other bodies in the same country. Where these are dependent on the leadership of individuals, rather than embedded in a long term and sustainable transformative approach, there is a risk that they will be dropped as people (politicians and officials) move on. The resources allocated in Whitehall to Women, Peace and Security have been downgraded over the years.

More broadly, while we welcomed the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict in London in June 2014, and its demand to cease impunity for perpetrators and to provide medical aid and support for victims, the competing demands of political, trade, and economic interests have seemed in the recent devastating conflicts throughout the MENA region to leave many of the most vulnerable women without much needed services or reparations, while allowing perpetrators to avoid accountability and punishment.

Northern Ireland

Within the UK itself, Northern Ireland stands out as an example of an area of conflict where the principles of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 have not been applied. There is little recognition that Northern Ireland is not yet a peaceful and stable society. It is a society still in transition from over 30 years of violent conflict. Women in Northern Ireland live with the legacy of conflict and many with the reality of continuing conflict. Yet, the impact of the conflict on women and their needs as victims are largely unrecognised and unmet. In terms of the BPFA, women remain marginalised from peace building processes and are significantly under-represented in politics and in key institutions.

Women account for only 23 per cent of local councillors, 19 per cent of Members of the Legislative Assembly, and female representation on public bodies (an important aspect of governance in Northern Ireland) has been stuck at around 33 per cent of public appointments for the last twenty years. These figures speak for themselves. The exclusion of women also applies to mechanisms set up to deal with the events during the conflict and the legacy of the conflict such as Healing Through Remembering⁸⁷ and the Consultative Group on the Past.⁸⁸ These consist mostly of men with no recognition that women should be equally represented.

An inquiry initiated by the Westminster All Party Group on Women, Peace and Security has collected evidence on the impact on women of living in a society transitioning from conflict. This produced compelling evidence about women's increasing vulnerability to crime, sexual violence and domestic violence, including the continuing paramilitary threat to women.

The failure of government to ensure that the impact of the conflict on women is acknowledged and addressed has a significant detrimental impact on women's human rights. This has been recognised by the UN CEDAW Committee. In 2008 the CEDAW Committee (Concluding Observations, paragraph 285) called for the "full implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 [...] in Northern Ireland." In its 2013 Concluding Observations the Committee noted that:

The Committee further recalls its previous concluding observations (A/63/38, paras. 284 and 285) and remains concerned at the low representation of women in the post-conflict process in Northern Ireland and the failure to fully implement Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). The Committee calls upon the state party to: [...] Ensure the participation of women in the post-conflict process in Northern Ireland, in line with Security Council resolution 1325 (2000).⁸⁹

The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences called for the development of strategies and action plans in Northern Ireland “to ensure the increased participation of women at all levels of decision-making, and in mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict.”⁹⁰

In 2014 the UK Government launched its 3rd National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. This made no mention of Northern Ireland. It is hard to see the Government’s resistance to meeting the principles of UNSCR 1325 as anything other than denying women and girls their rightful attention and gendered approaches in conflict, transition from conflict and post-conflict in Northern Ireland. The subjugation of women’s human rights to the peace process dominated by men has had wider implications with issues such as childcare needs, reproductive rights and trafficking receiving no or inadequate policy attention and resourcing.

Asylum

We remain concerned that the asylum process is not gender sensitive and lacks gender guidelines. For example, in Scotland, referrals and pathways of care for women asylum seekers who have experienced torture and/or sexual violence are not integrated, resulting in a lack of coherence and coordination between the different aspects. We urge the Government to ensure better service integration and the adoption of referral protocols between the Home Office, service providers and the different NHS health teams across different geographical regions. The special procedures that exist when a woman reports rape or sexual violence in the criminal justice system do not exist in the asylum system.

Poor quality interpreting is a barrier to asylum seeking women accessing justice and appropriate support services. For example, there are no national standards for interpreting in Scotland. This disproportionately affects women and girls disclosing sensitive personal information due to cultural issues, stigma around sexual violence and mental health. Particular barriers to accessing justice and support exist for women who present wishing to make an in-country claim for asylum in Scotland. Unless these women are identified as victims of trafficking, have children or have severe, evidenced health issues affecting their mobility, they are required to make an additional journey to London in order to access the asylum process. Scottish Refugee Council internal data shows that around half of new arrivals presenting at the office in Glasgow are required to make that journey. Until they lodge an application in person at the Croydon Asylum Screening Unit women are not entitled to any form of support, accommodation or assistance. Most people who seek protection are destitute and must therefore rely on charitable donations to make the journey, alone, from Glasgow to Croydon, a distance of more than 400 miles. The implications for vulnerable asylum seekers making this enforced journey without any recourse to support or any legal rights are very concerning.

Contrary to claims made by the UK Government, it is not the case that all regional Home Office centres have adequate arrangements for childcare during asylum interviews. For example, in Glasgow, childcare has not been available for the last six months due to a lack of security clearance for staff; when it was available, it was only offered on one half-day a week, was not available during school holidays and was only available for children over 1 year-old. Inadequate information is provided to applicants; the standard Home Office invitation to interview letter has not been update to reflect the existence of childcare facilities in different regions, and still encourages families to make other arrangements for childcare. This is despite refugee women writing to the UK Border Agency to raise the matter directly in 2011. The standard letter does not provide information about how to access childcare provision at Home Office regional offices.

Critical Area F: Women and the Economy

The World Economic Forum shows the UK has dropped out of the top 20 in the world for gender equality - particularly in economic participation which includes ratios of women in the work force, wage equality for similar work done by men and the number of women in senior roles.⁹¹ Yet the government has put great effort in encouraging women back into employment. It is acknowledged that, in general, employment is one of the best routes out of poverty - but not if the conditions of work and rates of pay are too low to cover costs, particularly childcare costs.

We are concerned that the impact of measures taken to rebalance the economy since the global financial crisis has fallen disproportionately on women. The Government has chosen to reduce the deficit by cutting public spending rather than increasing taxation. This has a greater impact on women as they are disproportionately employed in the public sector, and are overrepresented amongst the low paid, meaning that they lose more from welfare cuts. Cuts in childcare also create further barriers to women's access to the labour market. We believe that the cuts therefore act as a drag on overall economic recovery. We recommend a gender equality impact assessment of the programme of public funding cuts be carried out alongside an assessment of economic strategy from a gender equality perspective.⁹² This was a recommendation in the CEDAW Committee's Concluding Observations, with a particular focus on vulnerable women including disabled women and older women:

*The Committee urges the State party to mitigate the impact of austerity measures on women and services provided to women, particularly women with disabilities and older women. It should also ensure that Spending Reviews continuously focus on measuring and balancing the impact of austerity measures on women's rights. It should further review the policy of commissioning services wherever this may undermine the provision of specialised women's services.*⁹³

As we submit this report the trend in the UK's immediate labour market indicators is up: job vacancies are up, long-term unemployment is down, and more women are in work than ever. The number of self-employed women went up 5.3% between the last quarter of 2012 and the same period last year, to 1.357 million. Amongst men, self-employment rose by only 2.8%, albeit from a larger base.

These are welcome signs of improvement, but at the same time the labour market is heavily segregated by gender, and the jobs that are available to women are disproportionately low paid and insecure. We acknowledge the work of the Women's Business Council, but the statistics continue to show that women's businesses are smaller than men's and benefit less from investment, reflecting women's reduced access to credit. The Scottish Parliament estimates that, for Scotland alone, an increase in female labour market activity rates of 6% would increase output by 1.7% (£2.2 billion) and tax revenues by 1.5% (£700 million).⁹⁴

Women's lower pay and the very high cost of childcare in the UK means that, when decisions are made about childcare, it is usually the woman who takes up part time work or gives up work altogether. Men's hours of paid work usually increase when children are born. The ability to access affordable quality childcare remains a significant issue for women looking to enter the workforce. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires that:

*Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.*⁹⁵

The BPFA acted as a lever for the UK Government to issue its first national childcare strategy (in 1998), with ongoing development since. Under Section 26 of the Childcare Act

2006 Local Authorities in England and Wales are now required to regularly assess demand for, and availability of, local childcare provision.

The Scottish Government recently introduced limited childcare; the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act provides for 600 hours per year of free childcare for 3 and 4 year olds and for vulnerable 2 year olds.⁹⁶ However, it is up to local authorities how this is administered, resulting in a 'postcode lottery'.

Northern Ireland is the only region of the UK not to have a childcare strategy, despite studies and evaluations consistently highlighting the lack of affordable childcare as a major factor limiting women's ability to enter or remain in the labour market. Women in Northern Ireland are a significant proportion of the working poor - often because they are working part-time due to family responsibilities. Families in Northern Ireland are paying 45% of their income for childcare for one child, which is the highest amount in Europe; there are also problems of accessibility and flexibility. There is a large volume of evidence about the need for a childcare strategy in Northern Ireland, and identifying that the lack of affordable and accessible childcare is a significant barrier to women entering and returning to employment. There are serious concern about delays in developing a strategy, the need for adequate investment in childcare and the need for a government department to take lead responsibility. We urge the Government to address this without further delay.

Despite national childcare strategies there is still a lack of high quality, affordable childcare, and where this is not available the responsibility still falls disproportionately on women. This is evidenced by the fact that men aged up to 49 with children are more likely to be employed than men without, while the opposite is true for women.⁹⁷ This also means that women are disadvantaged at a key point in their career progression, and this disadvantage then continues over the rest of their working life, contributing to the so-called 'sticky floor'.

We recommend investing in a national system of universal childcare, which would help to make employment financially worthwhile for second earners and single parents (both more likely to be women). This would also address in-work poverty and ensure that women are not discouraged from entering employment because of the high cost of childcare.⁹⁸

Work also needs to be done to address so the statistical discrimination faced by women of child-bearing age; as this group is generally more likely to take maternity and childcare leave, individual women are seen as less committed and more of a hiring risk, regardless of their own personal intentions to have children. This negatively impacts women's opportunities for employment in jobs that value commitment and tenure, and limits employment options.⁹⁹ Until men are equally as likely to take leave for childcare this will continue to disadvantage women.

Progress has been very slow over the last twenty years in reducing the gender pay gap from 24% (1995-97) to 19% in (2004-07),¹⁰⁰ to 15.5% (2010).¹⁰¹ It is of extreme concern that the pay gap is now increasing: a 2014 European Commission report calculated the pay gap at 19.1%. This compares to the EU average of 16.4%, making the UK one of the worst countries in the EU for pay equality.¹⁰² Despite these figures, the government has not implemented section 78 of the Equality Act 2010, which would require businesses (of more than 250 employees) to measure and publish data on their gender pay gaps. We urge the Government to implement this simple measure.

A further difficulty is that in April 2014, equal pay questionnaires, which made pay levels more transparent, were abolished. These were campaigned for since 1970 and introduced belatedly in April 2011. In April 2012, Birmingham City Council had to pay out £757 million to 11,000 equal pay complainants. These questionnaires should be reintroduced. It is also harder to make claims on the grounds of sex discrimination since tribunal fees of £1,200 for such claims were introduced in July 2013.¹⁰³ Indeed, access to justice has worsened in other cases such as sexual harassment with a three-month time limit to make a claim. This

compares with 3 years to bring a claim if you are hit by a negligent car-driver and injured.¹⁰⁴

New legislation allowing couples to share up to 52 weeks parental leave, including 39 weeks paid, from 2015 is a step forward; we also support the requirement for the mother to take a minimum of 2 weeks leave directly following the birth. However, there remains a stigma around men taking parental leave; this prevents men from taking paternity leave, and there is no reason to think this will change with shared parental leave arrangements. Men express concern that taking leave will have negative implications for their career. The responsibility of parental leave - including resulting adverse career implications - thus falls on women. It is not until both parents share responsibilities equally that women will cease to be penalised for being a parent as well as an employee. This disadvantage continues following the birth, with a disproportionate burden of unpaid caring labour still carried out by women.¹⁰⁵

The example of Northern Ireland illustrates the economic challenges facing women in the UK. 40% of female employees work part-time compared to 10% of male employees and 80% of part-time employees are women. While the number of men in part-time employment is still low, the two-thirds increase in the number of men working in part-time jobs between 2002 and 2012 suggests that in a restricted jobs market this could have consequences for female employment. The number of women working part-time increases vulnerability to insecure precarious employment and low pay.

Critical Area G: Women in Power and Decision-Making

Women in Government

Without women in decision-making positions of power and influence, the goals of the BPFA cannot be met. While critical mass is important, it is not only a question of numbers; there must also be awareness of the way gender continues to alter life experiences, and life chances. Just as a gender perspective needs to be applied within government, so it is needed in legislatures.

In the Westminster Parliament, the proportion of women to men MPs remained at only 22% in the 2010 election, and this level had been achieved only because the Labour Party employed the 'temporary special measure' of women-only short lists. All-women short lists may be utilised until 2030. However, this right will expire in 2015 unless the Government extends the term.

The highest number of women to hold Cabinet positions concurrently occurred in 2008, with 8 women, whilst at the time of writing there are 5 women in Cabinet, making up 25%.¹⁰⁶ However, we welcome the fact that very senior positions such as Home Secretary, the Department of Education and the Department of International Development have women at Secretary of State level. The Minister for Women is added to these heavy portfolios, but is unfortunately very much under-resourced.

It is important to highlight that girls and young women are affected by a lack of women in leadership positions. 54% of girls and young women in a recent UK Girl Guiding Survey 'Girls Attitudes' said they felt put off from achieving, and felt that had less chance of succeeding themselves, by the lack of women in leadership positions in the UK.¹⁰⁷

In Wales, having achieved parity in the Assembly but seen attrition over the last 15 years, the Government is now looking very seriously at measures, including the possibility of quotas in this area. Inequality in power sharing and decision making may be improved in Wales through the Presiding Officer's Women into Public Life Portal, and the Active Citizens programme of training by Women Making a Difference.

Women represent over 50% of Scotland’s population but are severely underrepresented in political and public life. Figure 2 shows the proportion of women in different levels of politics.

Figure 2

<i>Representative Body</i>	<i>Percentage of Women Representatives</i>
UK Parliament	22%
Scottish Parliament	33%
Local Authorities	24.3%

The Cabinet of the Scottish Government is made up of 40% women, which is a positive step. However, it is clear that much more needs to be done in order to improve the participation of women in political life. The recent Scottish Referendum campaign has seen a groundswell of women throughout the country, from a variety of different backgrounds, becoming involved with and actively engaged in politics. It is hoped that this momentum will continue.

At present, there is no requirement to publish gender-specific statistics after elections - either with regards to the number of women seeking election or the number of successful candidates. Publication of these statistics would not only show the percentage of women elected into public office, but would help to identify gaps in representation.

Disabled and BME women should be actively encouraged to become involved in political processes, as noted by the CEDAW Committee in their 2013 UK review Concluding Observations, which called upon the State to “continue to take concrete targeted measures to improve the representation of women in Parliament and the judiciary, particularly black and ethnic minority women and women with disabilities”.¹⁰⁸

In 2012, the UK Government launched the ‘Access to Elected Office’ campaign, aimed at supporting disabled people seeking election by providing access to grants.¹⁰⁹ Through this strategy there have been opportunities for disabled people to participate in online training courses and internships, as well as guidance for political parties regarding the legal requirement to provide reasonable adjustments. We applaud this initiative, and encourage it to be fully resourced and monitored to ensure its success.

Women on Boards

Both in Europe and in the UK, there has been growing pressure to increase women’s representation on the Boards of public companies. Following the Davies Review¹¹⁰ and the House of Lords Select EU Committee hearing,¹¹¹ the Government decided to pursue a voluntary policy seeking executive search companies to commit to recommending women among candidates for directorships. Lord Davies emphasised that there was no doubt that there were more than adequate numbers of qualified women to fill these posts. Using this method has led to a substantial rise in the proportion of women on the top FTSE 100 Companies: currently all have appointed at least one woman. However, the main issue is now that very few appointments are made from management - i.e. the directors are independent, not executive. The problem with the top 250 FTSE companies has not been resolved, as still more than 60 have no women. The position is monitored and reported on annually.¹¹² The target is low at 25% - we think at least 40% of each gender is achievable and would lead to fewer accusations of tokenism. If the progress is not maintained we seek the use of temporary special measures such as the quotas undertaken by the Norwegian Government.

We welcome the Government's efforts to improve diversity of representation, including from ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, on public boards. However, the recommendations do not make it clear if this is also part of increasing women's representation.

The Scottish Government recently consulted on the introduction of Gender Quotas on Public Boards.¹¹³ Scottish women make up 52% of the population and, in October 2013, the level of female employment in Scotland reached its highest level since 1992 at 69%. Women also now make up the majority of University graduates. In spite of all this, there is still significant gender inequality on public boards, with women comprising only 36% of board places and 21% of the current board chairs.¹¹⁴

Currently the Scottish Parliament does not have legislative powers to address this issue. The Scottish Government has therefore opened up dialogue with the UK Government on transferring powers by way of an Order under section 30 of the Scotland Act 1998. Such powers would give the Scottish Parliament additional levers for change, should it choose to use them, where other mechanisms are not working or are not delivering change fast enough. The consultation set out to gather views from individuals, public bodies and other organisations with an interest in the issue of gender imbalance on public boards on how mandatory quotas that ensure a minimum of 40% of women's representation on public boards should be introduced.

The Scottish Women's Convention wholeheartedly supported the proposal to introduce gender quotas on public boards. The only way to ensure that women are represented at the levels they need to be is if quotas are introduced. It is, however, important to recognise that they are only temporary special measures - that is, they are something which should be put in place in the short-term to achieve a longer term aim. Therefore, any proposals that the Scottish Government put forward to the UK Government must make clear that mandatory quotas should only be enforced until change is embedded:

*The whole point of quotas is surely to get us to a level playing field, which doesn't exist at the moment. Once we see more women on public boards, you would hope there will be enough momentum to keep us there without the need for specific measures.*¹¹⁵

Quotas alone, however, are not enough. There are a range of reasons why women do not apply for these positions and these need to be taken into consideration in order to challenge the culture which surrounds public appointments. Boards - whether public, company or voluntary sector - more often than not do not reflect the people they are appointed to represent. This has to change.

Critical Area H: Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women

We welcome the fact the UK Government has for some time appointed a dedicated Minister for Women. However, she is often allocated other equalities and is also responsible for a major department. At present the Minister for Women is also Secretary of State for Education and, in the last four years, the post has been under the Home Office and the Department for Culture, Media and Sports. These are major portfolios, which means the Minister for Women has less time to attend to the equality of women. Under the present Government there are also Junior Ministers, sometimes in different departments including for a time, and in the Department of Justice, in which urgent matters of inequality for women needed to be addressed. However, the message sent out is that Women's Equality is not important enough to warrant a Secretary of State and a well-resourced department of its own. The Ministerial team is supported by a small

freestanding unit, the Government Equalities Office, which is persistently under-resourced.

We welcome the Equality Strategy: Building a Fairer Britain,¹¹⁶ and the Equality Strategies in the devolved nations. We also welcome cross-departmental committees and the fact that women's equality and issues such as Violence against Women and Girls is addressed within the Cabinet. The Gender Directors' Network brings the four nations together, but gender mainstreaming to include gender budgeting and impact assessment for all policies in all departments is far from a reality.

The Equality Act was also supposed to provide specific information on gender inequality across the country, but in England the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) has no specific gender component, although it does in Wales and Scotland. The PSED was reviewed by the UK Government in 2011.¹¹⁷

We are concerned that there is a rolling back of political commitment to gender equality. This includes, as the CEDAW 2013 UK review and various special rapporteurs have indicated, policies which impact more negatively on women such as austerity measures, as well as the dismantling of institutions promoting gender equality and the lack of engagement between officials and NGOs - including across the nations of the UK.

In Wales, there is no Minister for Women, although the Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty takes responsibility for equality and diversity. Mechanisms to promote women - quotas, affirmative action programmes, training, mentoring schemes, co-coaching, secondment, and a statutory requirement to recruit proportional to the population - are all things being considered in the Welsh Government and across the Public Sector, in part because the public sector equality duty is statutory in Wales.

In Scotland, there is also no dedicated Minister for Women; currently gender equality falls under the remit of the Cabinet Secretary for Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners' Rights. Women have made clear that, despite efforts from the Scottish Government to advance gender equality issues, there is a real need for a dedicated Minister.

The Government supports the national Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), which has responsibility overall for England, Scotland and Wales but not for Northern Ireland. The EHRC has suffered a cut in its budget from £70 million to £20.7 million and currently has just one dedicated officer for gender equality. It has offices in both Wales and Scotland (Scotland has its own Human Rights Commission).

Northern Ireland has its own Equality Commission and a Human Rights Commission, and previously had a Community Relations Council. The Government announced its intention in the *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* to establish an Equality and Good Relations Commission.¹¹⁸ We are concerned that this will further dilute the focus and resources dedicated to gender equality. A Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland published in 2006 made little progress, and a decision was made to develop a new strategy. While NGOs in Northern Ireland welcomed the emphasis within the first Gender Equality Strategy on the integration of the CEDAW obligations into the objectives of the strategy, the proposed new strategy falls far short and is retrogressive.

Overall, the main difficulty experienced by the women's sector in the last 4 years has arisen from the abolition of the Women's National Commission (WNC). This was financed with a small budget by government but acted independently of it. Its role was to bring the informed opinion of women together, and it worked as a bridge to all government departments, not just the Minister for Women. The Government's review states they consider the new programme of engagement with women, with most tasks undertaken from within GEO, successful. But the WNC was admired across the world and envied by NGOs from other nations, especially in its support of women's organisations at the annual

Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) as it reviewed the BPFA's critical areas. The tasks undertaken by the WNC included setting up working groups drawn from its partner organisations from across the UK (more than 500 by the time it closed) to monitor areas of concern such as VAWG, international work and immigration, and to develop policy preparing advice directly to Ministers across government. This enabled the development of expertise and the inclusion of newer and smaller organisations in the debates. The WNC also had responsibility for preparing the quadrennial Shadow or Alternative reports of NGOs to the CEDAW Committee and produced the 5-yearly Beijing+ reviews. It is not possible for the Government to undertake these tasks because, clearly, they would lack the required independence.

No institution is perfect and the WNC had its critics. But its abolition led to fragmentation of the sector because we were left without a legitimated and resourced single body capable of bringing groups together from across the whole country, and with no direct access to Ministers. Power now lay within government to determine who would be invited to discuss what with Ministers in Round Tables. The CEDAW Committee was also concerned:

*In 2010, the Coalition Government abolished the Women's National Commission (WNC). The WNC had previously been an immensely important institution, whose "purpose and [...] strength was its ability to canvass the views of women from across the English regions and from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and to create the conditions in which women [could] find their voice and communicate it to government."*¹¹⁹

Since 2010, there has been no adequate substitute established to replace the WNC. The Government Equalities Office, although formally the replacement, is not equipped to focus on the complex and wide-ranging duties that are required of a national machinery for the advancement of women. The current formula for consultation consists of ad hoc round table meetings held by the Government, which means there is no formal mechanism that is independent of the Government. Moreover, although these meetings provide a positive opportunity for more intimate discussion, they place civil society on the back foot; it is the Government which initiates the meetings, deciding the invitees and the agenda. The CEDAW Committee expressed "[concern] that the State party's new modernised approach to engaging with women's organisations negatively impacts on women's ability to be involved and to contribute to furthering the implementation of the Convention."¹²⁰

The Government review mentions its engagement with the independent UK NGO CSW Alliance, members of which are producing this NGO Report. In 2011, the GEO asked NGOs to provide a small group to liaise with them towards the following CSW. This was done but NGOs wanted a more grassroots and democratic arrangements. Hence, in 2012, women came together in Bristol from across the UK, set up this group, developed goals and plans and elected co-chairs. Subsequent meetings held in Birmingham and London led to the naming of new representatives to liaise with government around CSW. While the GEO preferred smaller numbers, this process has developed and each year small groups nominated from within the Alliance with specific expertise meet with the negotiators of the text to be agreed before and during the meetings in New York, and the whole Alliance is recognised as the main resource and conduit for government around CSW. Policy papers have been developed within the Alliance and used to lobby and advise the Government and they have been well received. A strong and mutually helpful relationship has developed and is valued both by the NGOs and by the GEO. However, this is completely un-resourced by the UK Government: not even travel expenses for women to attend meetings with the GEO have been reimbursed, excluding marginalised groups and those who need to travel long distances to London. From the outset a Secretariat and leadership

has been provided by NAWO, which has now been successful in gaining support for this task from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

The overall result has been a dismantling of a 'gender architecture' inclusive of civil society and led from within civil society which sets its own agenda vis à vis government.

Although there is some recognition given to the difference across the devolved nations this needs to be made clearer and recognised as an area which could be turned to positive effect if women and their organisations in each of the nations assisted to develop identified architecture for working within the framework of a UK structure.

Critical Area I: Human Rights of Women

Human Rights Framework

The UK has a solid legislative framework and a good record in signing up to international human rights conventions. However, it has recorded a number of reservations to conventions affecting women's and girls' human rights, including CEDAW, and recently we have observed a rolling back of the UK's traditional commitment to the human rights agenda. This seems to be due to a mixture of resistance to what is seen as internationally imposed norms, some xenophobia, and a view that during a global recession women's rights must take second place to the dominant austerity agenda. We note that the BPFA calls on governments to develop a comprehensive education programme on human rights but this is not in place in UK schools. We urge the Government to rectify this.

Under the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA), all public authorities in the UK have a duty to observe the HRA rights in all their decisions. However, public authorities are not routinely compliant with the duty. As a result, women have had to have recourse to the courts in order to, for example, secure safe accommodation (for a woman fleeing domestic violence, whose children would have been removed from her care had she been homeless), and challenging the state's attempt to evict a woman whose asylum application had failed whilst she was in hospital giving birth.

We are concerned that the HRA and indeed the *concept* of human rights are persistently attacked in the UK media. This exacerbates prejudices against marginalised groups. We are especially concerned at the lack of political leadership in challenging these misrepresentations; rather, government ministers have called for the repeal of the HRA and for the UK to pull out of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). This represents an extremely regressive step in our human rights protections, which will have a significant detrimental impact on the rights of women and girls in the UK.

Given the negative rhetoric around human rights, often propagated by UK political leaders, the UK Government must ensure that the vital rights and mechanisms contained in the HRA, which provide important protections for women and girls, will remain part of UK law.

Access to Justice

The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO), which came into force across England and Wales in April 2013, means legal aid is no longer available in England and Wales for issues including VAWG. Research has found that 43% do not have the required standard of evidence of violence to apply successfully for legal aid.¹²¹ Domestic violence was named as an exception, but only under specific circumstances or with strict 'evidential' eligibility requirements and a slew of other conditions attached - something campaigners have argued puts onerous obstacles in the way of access to justice for the poorest and most vulnerable victims. Another significant obstacle is that those who have experienced abuse must prove that they had a condition or injuries consistent with those of a victim of domestic violence within 24 months of making a legal aid application.

Given that many victims sometimes take years to come forward, imposing such an arbitrary limit shows a fundamental lack of understanding of the nature of domestic violence and of coercion and control over an extended time period. Unable to meet these requirements, some people are going into debt to borrow money to try to go to court.

The courts have also criticised the Government's curtailment of legal aid. In 2014 the courts held, in relation to six related immigration cases, that the Ministry of Justice failed to make sufficient 'exceptional case funding' available. It said the threshold had been set too high and therefore breached human rights law.¹²²

Access to justice is particularly at risk for Muslim women in communities that use sharia law tribunals. As a formal arbitration tribunal, sharia courts are not allowed to adjudicate over criminal matters, yet there is substantial anecdotal evidence that they have adjudicated in cases including domestic violence¹²³ and marital rape.¹²⁴ In these and other cases women's testimony may be regarded as worth half that of a man's, and discriminatory rulings on divorce, inheritance, property rights and child custody occur.¹²⁵

Whilst sharia courts may play a useful role in arbitrating minor civil matters, it must be acknowledged that they are also used as a tool for discrimination and inequality against women. Migrant women who do not speak English, and may not know their legal rights - including recourse to a secular court - are particularly vulnerable. The high cost of court and lack of assistance through legal aid also means some women are compelled to use such arbitration tribunals. For this reason, we support the Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) Bill currently tabled in the House of Lords. Amongst other things, this Bill would ensure that sex discrimination law applies to all arbitration tribunal proceedings, and allow discriminatory rulings to be struck down; make it easier for courts to set aside a consent order if it was reached under duress or coercion, and explicitly state the limits to arbitration courts' jurisdiction.¹²⁶ We ask that the passing of this Bill be accompanied by a strong public campaign to ensure that women are aware of their legal rights.

The UK response for Beijing+20 fails to mention the rights of women seeking asylum or refugees. We welcome the UK's agreement to take vulnerable women from Syria including those affected by violence for resettlement in the UK, and urge the UK to increase the numbers currently arriving under this programme.

The BPFA refers to the need for gender guidelines in relation to refugee status determination. Whilst we are pleased that the Home Office has had such guidelines since 2004, the gender guidelines for the appeals tribunal were withdrawn in 2006 and have not been adequately replaced. In a recent report a woman claiming asylum on the basis of her sexuality said "...the judge told me 'I didn't look like a lesbian, I look like an intelligent person'".¹²⁷ This highlights the need for the UK to bring in a form of guidelines/practice direction for immigration judges on dealing with gender and sexuality issues.

Critical Area J: Women and the Media

The representation of women in the media is a serious barrier to the implementation of women's equality. It is characterised by general objectification and over sexualisation of women in the press, TV, music videos, other mass and social media, and advertising.

The Leveson Inquiry Report stated, and we agree, that many of the images found in common media publications:

*...reflect a wider cultural failure to treat women with dignity and respect and/or a practice which, intentionally or not, has the effect of demeaning and degrading women.*¹²⁸

We consider that the daily picture of a young topless woman on page 3 in the Sun, the air brushing images of female celebrities to make them appear thinner and/or more curvaceous, the sexualisation of clothing styles at an early age for girls, all contribute to both women's inequality more generally, and a culture of seeing women and girls in terms of their sexuality and as being sexually available. This in turn creates a conducive context for sexual harassment and sexual violence. Of particular concern is the extent of the eroticisation of violence against women.

We believe this abuse of women in our culture is directly related to the harm many women suffer. Alison Saunders, Director of Public Prosecutions for the Crown Prosecution Service, names media portrayal of women as one of the key problems in securing rape convictions, as well as one of the reasons that women are reluctant to report rapes to the police. She emphasises the role that rape myths continue to play in undermining efforts to secure justice for victims of rape and sexual assault.¹²⁹ This general media tendency to perpetuate rape myths and victim blame, where shame and responsibility is placed on the victim rather than the perpetrator, must be challenged if we are to prevent rape and secure justice for survivors of sexual violence.

We support the recommendations made by women's organisations to the Inquiry.¹³⁰ These include the need for effective regulation of the press, overseen by an independent third party. The code that the press are bound to must be in line with equalities legislation and international obligations on equality that the UK has signed, including strong rules regarding sexism and gender discrimination. We support the journalistic guideline recommendations found in the publication *Handle With Care*, produced by Zero Tolerance and Violence Against Women Prevention Scotland. We also note with approval the following extract from the last UK Shadow CEDAW report:

*[...] such images would be prohibited for adults in the workplace under equality legislation, because they are considered a form of sexual harassment, and when the campaign group OBJECT submitted evidence to the Leveson Inquiry on the harms associated with this persistent portrayal of women as sex objects in the UK press, their exhibits were censored. Yet, as OBJECT highlighted, such portrayals of women form a staple part of mainstream tabloids which are sold in ordinary newsagents and supermarkets without any form of age-restriction. This lack of press regulation on the issue is inconsistent with other forms of media, and equality legislation, and it allows for the sexual objectification of women in mainstream media to continue unchecked.*¹³¹

Linked to this is the rise in the use of social media and the persecution of women who reject gender stereotypes or speak out for women's rights. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have been used for 'trolling' of women in the public eye, including rape and death threats to female MPs¹³², and has reinforced the exclusion of women from these new public forums.

We consider that this situation is exacerbated by the serious under-representation of women as editors, journalists, and commentators. Research shows that around 78% of all front-page press stories were attributed to men; 22% were by women.¹³³ This reflects the findings of the 5 yearly monitoring of the UK as part of the global gender media-monitoring project; the 2010 report found that 78% of those that report on government and politics are men, and for economics the figure is 69%, reinforcing stereotypes. Men even dominate the content of the news stories themselves. Of all those quoted or mentioned by name in the lead stories, 84% were men, and 16% women. There are also significant differences in the roles that named men and women play in news stories, for example, 83% of 'experts' were men. When it comes to named 'victims', of the stories that were gender-coded, 41% were women, as compared with 59% who were men; of gender-coded 'survivors' a mere 28% were women, whilst 72% were men.¹³⁴

Critical Area K: Women and the Environment

We support the Government's recognition that climate change has differential impacts on women. The creation by the Department of Energy and Climate Change of a Gender Equality Scheme is positive; it is crucial that equality impact assessments must be carried out to ensure gender-sensitive policies, not just abroad by DFID, but also here in the UK.

Extreme weather conditions, seen more frequently due to climate change, disproportionately affect certain groups. Older and pregnant women are more likely to be endangered by heat waves. There is also some evidence that those with pre-existing health and mental health conditions are at a greater risk. In cases of extreme cold, floods, heavy downpour and snow, poorer women are also more likely to be affected; those who cannot afford additional heating or who are dependent on public transport are particularly vulnerable.¹³⁵ As women are more likely to be in poverty, they are also less likely to be able to access the services needed to mitigate the risks, and are more likely to suffer severe health consequences. 16.8% of single-parent households, the majority of which are mothers, experience energy poverty.¹³⁶ There is also some evidence that violent crime, including domestic violence, increases during heat waves.¹³⁷

Women must be considered not just as subjects affected by climate change, but also as agents in dealing with it; as the UK moves towards renewable energy and sustainable industries it is crucial that women are involved in the policy, business and technology development. This requires an investment in the education and training of women and girls, including in STEM subjects, a commitment to entrepreneurial funding for women working in green technology, and ongoing political support for women's voices.

Critical Area L: The Girl Child

The girl child suffers from the double discrimination of gender and age. Girls are a distinct social group who continue to be underrepresented, despite consistently being cited as key to development agenda. Within the UK, girls' rights are threatened by poverty, gender inequality, violence, poor education, unfair policies and ingrained sexist attitudes. Significant progress has been made in this area over the past several years, particularly through the efforts of organizations such as Plan UK, Girls Not Brides and other NGOs, including a project carried out by NAWO in which girls identified their experiences of sexual objectification and lack of voice, producing a manifesto of demands for the European Parliament.¹³⁸ We welcome the Governments' work on Body Confidence and Image,¹³⁹ and the fact a Girl Summit was held on a future free from FGM and forced marriage at the highest level: 10 Downing Street.¹⁴⁰ However, much more still needs to be achieved.

Cases of young girls groomed into sexual exploitation and facing rape, abuse and harm have exposed further chronic errors in child protection systems that are failing young women and girls with devastating consequences. The cases are reported across different local areas, illustrating a pattern of abuse that: is nationwide, predominantly impacts on women and girls, and is predominantly perpetrated by men and boys.

In December 2013, a report into the state handling of cases in Rochdale identified a catalogue of errors. This resulted in an acknowledgement by Greater Manchester Police that the force had let down a number of vulnerable girls who were groomed by gangs for sexual abuse. It is believed there may be up to 50 victims in all. Similar cases have been investigated in Oxford, Leicester and in Birmingham. In the last few months a high profile inquiry carried out by Alexis Jay into child sexual violence and exploitation in Rotherham uncovered another catalogue of errors, where estimates of the numbers of girls abused over years is put at 1400.¹⁴¹

The Deputy Children's Commissioner for England conducted an Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups.¹⁴² It was found that, between August 2010 and October 2011, a total of 2409 children were known to be victims of child sexual exploitation, with 16,500 children and young people at risk. The rape of girls - sisters, girl friends, even mothers - as a way to control them and require them to hold firearms, weapons or drugs on their behalf by young men in gangs has also been documented.¹⁴³ Whilst serious gaps remain in the knowledge, practice and services required to tackle child sexual exploitation, this illustrates part of the continuum of VAWG and a pattern of violence and abuse that disproportionately affects girls.¹⁴⁴

The increased accessibility of new technology must also be considered: research shows that children, especially boys, are increasingly accessing violent pornography online, which embeds and enforces negative attitudes towards women and girls.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, research by the National Society for the Protection of Children from Cruelty (NSPCC) found that one in three teenage girls who had some kind of relationship experience had experienced sexual violence from a partner.¹⁴⁶ More recent studies have found high levels of exposure to harmful behaviours online, and raise concerns around 'sexting' amongst children, including abusive and coercive behaviour by boys.¹⁴⁷ Given this, we believe it is imperative that all schools offer education on sexuality that is consent-focussed, with a discussion that extends to these new technologies.

Girls from minority communities often face additional discrimination and are at risk of further violence. Accurate statistics on FGM are difficult to obtain but it is known that numbers are high; one study estimates that 66,000 women who had undergone FGM were living in England and Wales in 2001, including an estimated 32,000 girls under the age of 15. Evidence from the time suggests that the prevalence was increasing, and so it is likely the number is considerably higher today.¹⁴⁸ FGM has been legislated against 1985, and yet we are only just now starting to see the first prosecutions. We acknowledge the sensitivity required to address this violence, particularly given the family links often involved, and so we encourage those in the enforcement and justice sectors to work closely with expert groups. The Department of Education and legislators must work with expert NGOs and survivors to ensure that domestic laws and policies prioritise the safety and security of girls while tackling this human rights violation. Funding for specialist training organisations would also support teacher training and rights based education for all students.

We are also concerned about anecdotal reports of increased occurrences of so-called breast-ironing. Research has not yet been done to ascertain just how widespread this is, but we are eager to ensure that the failures seen in the response to FGM are not repeated.

The Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) deals with around 1,300 cases annually, and many more cases go unreported.¹⁴⁹ 40% of the cases deal with minors under the age of 18¹⁵⁰. Women and girls are considerably more likely to have need of this service: in 2010, of the 1735 cases that the FMU supported or advised on, 86% were female. Of the 1735, 50 involved victims with learning disabilities, 17 with physical disabilities, 3 with both learning and physical disabilities, and 36 of the victims identified as LGBT.¹⁵¹ There is in general an acknowledgment that this is a gendered issue, but because forced marriage takes place in roughly equal numbers of men and women with learning disabilities, it is not seen as still a gendered issue. Yet such cases often have multiple layers of complexity, and there may not be informed consent by either party to the marriage. For example, the woman brought to marry a man with learning disabilities, often to act as his carer, may be in no position to refuse the marriage.¹⁵² She also has fewer options for escape since it brings 'dishonour' on her or her family. Sensitive ways of engaging to provide support and education for the women and girls, and for the men involved, as well as for the families that have arranged these marriages, is essential.

Emerging Issues

We welcome the attention paid in the Government report to future priorities and continuing challenges including to minority groups and also to the challenges of devolution.

Here we raise a number of emerging issues of particular concern. Some have been raised in the report but require further elaboration.

Widows

Increased conflict, both inter- and intra-state, has resulted in a great many women of all ages becoming widows. In many cultures, their livelihoods, independence, dignity and safety is at risk through discrimination and abuse, including through harmful traditional practices and because the low status of women within cultures and religions may require them, for example, to be accompanied in public by a male relative. Their experiences and needs are different to the experiences and needs of women who have never married or divorced; we call for recognition of this fact, and for statistics to be disaggregated according to these categories as well as by age. Widows who come to the UK as migrants, refugees and asylum seekers face a particularly challenging intersection of discrimination. We encourage the UK Government to formally recognise widows as a specific group, including recognition for their needs and the specific abuses faced by widows who are seeking asylum.

Men and boys

Much attention has been given as of late and in the review topics of the Commission on the Status of Women to the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality. This has been particularly highlighted by the recent UN Women *He For She* campaign, which places the male ahead of the female and has him acting *for* rather than *with* women. In addition, Iceland has announced its intention to host, with Suriname, a men-only conference on gender equality, including discussing violence against women (since revised to involve women, although seemingly still with some men-only sessions).¹⁵³ Partnership with men and boys should not imply a take-over by them.

While it is clear that achieving gender equality requires a change in attitudes and behaviours across the whole of society, it is less clear how central the role is that men and boys should play. Addressing issues such as violence against women and girls, which is primarily perpetrated by men requires, men to turn their attention to themselves, but also requires a primary focus on and sensitivity to the experiences and needs of women. Women-only spaces are still essential for women.

While men, too, are affected by gender inequality, it is women who bear the significant burden of ongoing systematic and historic discrimination. Balancing the need for society-wide change while ensuring that initiatives do, in fact, serve their ultimate aim of gender equality is a significant challenge, and there is no clear consensus on how it is best achieved. For that reason, it is crucial that we have an open, rigorous and ongoing conversation.

Climate Change

Although a brief mention was made above, the urgency and importance of addressing climate change is only going to increase. It is crucial that more work is done to understand the gender differential impacts, particularly here in the UK where there has only been limited research so far. Policies must be gender-sensitive with equality impact

assessments carried out, and women of all ages must be involved at all levels of decision-making around this increasingly pressing issue.

Ageing

Globally, the population is ageing. This is true of the UK. The ratio of people of working age to people of pensionable age was 3.2:1 in 2008; this is expected to drop to 2.8:1 by 2033.¹⁵⁴ This is going to have a significant impact on many of the critical areas, particularly with regards to provision of public services. Although there is some evidence that the gender life expectancy gap is closing, women are likely to continue to outlive men. This fact, coupled with women's disproportionate rates of poverty and lower lifetime earnings, means they are more likely to be dependent on public service provision of social care, health care, etc.

However, older women as well as men are significant contributors to the unpaid work of caring and bring their expertise to bear on problems. The continuing discrimination throughout society, especially against older women in the media and in decision-making at senior levels, is unwarranted and harmful, and needs to change.

Meanwhile, young women, especially those aged 16-19, seek to have their voices heard and to be full participants in the political and economic life of the UK. They showed clearly their capacity to do this in the Scottish referendum on independence when 16-18 year olds had the vote.

Constitutional Change

Following the referendum in Scotland, any commission or development of a programme for constitutional change must have women of all ages and backgrounds participating in equal measure.

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