

Wales Women's Rights Manifesto for the UK General Election



GENDER NETWORK



RHWYDWAITH RHYWEDD

Wales Women's Rights Manifesto for the UK General Election

The Gender Network, a policy forum of 80 third sector representatives, activists and academics fighting for women's rights in Wales, calls on all political parties and candidates to put gender equality at the heart of the election and UK policy making. Our manifesto covers six areas where we need to see political parties acting to protect and advance gender equality in Wales.

1. Fair Finance

In 2022, the gender pay gap across full and part time workers was [14.9% in the UK](#) and [11.3% in Wales](#). Women continue to be overrepresented in lower-paid part-time roles, mainly due to unequal caring responsibilities. Even among full-time workers, the gender pay gap is [8.3% in the UK](#) and [6.1% in Wales](#), partly due to women remaining underrepresented in senior roles.

The problem is especially acute for women from ethnic minority backgrounds. The [most recent research](#) published in 2022 shows that, across the UK, Black African women earn 26%, Bangladeshi women 28% and Pakistani women 31% less than the average male worker.

The social security system does not work for women. Women are more likely to rely on social security and have historically [borne the brunt](#) of welfare cuts. This [has been exacerbated](#) by the introduction of Universal Credit (UC), the benefit cap, the two-child limit, the 'bedroom tax' and rising costs of living. With Wales having the [highest poverty rates](#) in the UK, women in Wales are [particularly affected](#) by problems with the social security system. The [impact has been especially stark](#) on women who are single parents, disabled, trans, from an ethnic minority background or any combination of these.

We are calling on all parties to:

- Increase the national living wage to the level of the real living wage;
- Increase the real value of benefits and retain regular uprating of social security benefits in line with the consumer price index;
- Implement a social security system that supports women, by abolishing the benefit cap and two-child limit, creating an allowance for second earners within households with children or limited capability to work, splitting UC payments between adults within a household, removing the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' condition and reducing the severity and length of sanctions to ensure that no-one is left destitute;
- Devolve the administration of certain aspects of the social security system to ensure that the system meets the needs of those in Wales;
- Review funding arrangements and fiscal competencies for Wales to ensure these are sustainable and meet the needs of Wales' demography;
- Collect and publish pay gap data for other protected characteristics disaggregated by gender to better understand the experiences of women facing intersecting discrimination;
- Lower the threshold for statutory gender pay gap reporting to companies with 100+ employees and introduce mandatory reporting on pay gaps by other protected characteristics;
- Require companies to produce action plans to tackle their reported pay gaps. The plans should have clear timelines and implementation should be monitored by an independent public body.

2. Caring Responsibilities

Parents, unpaid carers and the childcare and social care workforce form an invisible network that holds our society together and that is largely provided by women.

The crucial importance of care work has become apparent during the pandemic but clapping and lip service have yielded little change on the ground, leaving the sector in crisis. The value of unpaid care in England and Wales is estimated to be [£162 billion](#). A lack of affordable childcare means many parents are unable to work or increase their hours, with single parents having the [highest in-work poverty rate](#) of all household types in Wales. Across the UK, [up to 1.7 million women](#) are prevented from taking on more working hours due to lack of childcare, resulting in up to £28.2 billion economic output lost every year.

Each part of the care crisis is connected. Unpaid carers are propping up a failing social care system. Social care and childcare workers are underpaid and undervalued, leading to high staff turnover rates and gaps in provision, which prevents parents from returning to work and leaves unpaid carers without adequate support and respite breaks. A historic lack of investment at the UK level has brought a unique challenge in Wales' demographic context.

We must fairly reward care work, recognise its value, and challenge norms and policies that prevent men from taking on an equal share in caring responsibilities. [Research by the UK Women's Budget Group](#) suggests that a net annual investment of 2.5% of GDP would generate nearly 2 million well-paid jobs, raise the overall employment rate by 5 percentage points, reduce the gender employment gap by 4 percentage points and help meet net zero targets at the same time. Such investments are necessary to increase budgets in the devolved nations and to enable an expansion of high-quality childcare and social care in Wales.

We are calling on all parties to:

- Invest 2.5% of GDP in childcare and social care – the social infrastructure that sustains our society and economy;
- Raise Carer's Allowance and increase the earning threshold for unpaid carers in receipt of Carer's Allowance;
- Improve the Shared Parental Leave policy by including non-transferrable leave for fathers and better pay compensation, to enable both parents to take an equal share;
- Introduce a right for workers to have five to ten days paid care leave entitlement per year.

3. Representation and Leadership

Women are still under-represented [at all levels](#) of UK politics. They make up only 35% of members in the House of Commons, 29% in the House of Lords, and 30% of Cabinet Members. As of May 2023, the UK ranks 48th in the [global ranking of women's representation in parliament](#). Things are looking slightly better in Wales, where women make up [43% of Senedd Members \(MSs\)](#) and [36% of councillors](#), but more work is needed to ensure progress includes women who face intersecting discrimination, including racism, ableism and homophobia.

Following the 2019 General Election, 66 or [10% of MPs](#) were from minority ethnic backgrounds, with 37 of these being women. The 2021 Senedd election saw the first woman MS from a minority ethnic background since devolution, with overall only 5% of MSs from an ethnic minority background. Lack of reliable data on other protected characteristics makes it difficult to monitor progress at the local and national level and calls for the UK Government to

implement Section 106 of the Equality Act, which would facilitate better data collection at the devolved level, have repeatedly been ignored.

Urgent action is needed to accelerate the glacial progress towards diverse and equal representation. While there is no silver bullet, international evidence shows that quotas are the [single most effective tool](#) in fast-tracking women's representation. Wales is leading the way among the four nations, having committed to introducing gender quotas for the 2026 Senedd elections. Globally, [intersectionally embedded quotas](#) are emerging as best practice to ensure diverse representation across different protected characteristics. Quotas need to form part of a wider culture change and a range of measures to nurture leadership talent that reflects the full diversity of women in the UK.

We are calling on all parties to:

- Implement Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, requiring every political party to collect equality monitoring data on their candidates including in local elections;
- Nurture leadership talent among women from underrepresented groups at all levels of government and public boards through a range of measures including:
 - Support for job-sharing and remote working arrangements;
 - Adopt a zero-tolerance approach to sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and discrimination against people from the LGBTQ+ communities;
 - Expand and adequately resource schemes for mentoring, coaching & shadowing;
 - Ensure information on becoming a candidate is easily accessible and proactively encourage people from a diverse range of backgrounds and communities to apply;
 - Promote and adequately resource professional support networks for women and people with other protected characteristics;
 - Introduce legally binding quotas for at least 50% women candidates and explore the introduction of [intersectionally embedded quotas](#), in line with emerging international best practice;
- Amend the Equality Act to enable the use of quotas and the equivalent of All-women shortlists for protected characteristics other than sex;
- Remove the 2030 sunset clause for All-women shortlist and ensure shortlists for any protected characteristics can be used until no longer required;
- Implement an independent process with meaningful sanctions to deal with allegations of violence or harassment.

4. Tackling Gender Health Inequalities

Women experience poorer outcomes in many areas of healthcare [in Wales](#) and [across the UK](#). Although women have a higher average life expectancy than men, they spend fewer years in good health. They are more likely to receive delayed diagnosis and care across a range of conditions and are at higher risk of having health problems misdiagnosed or dismissed. A [2020 study](#) found that the UK has the largest women's health gap among the G20, and the 12th largest globally.

Several alarming statistics show especially severe inequalities for women who experience intersecting discrimination. Across the UK, Black women are [almost four times more likely](#) to die in childbirth than white women, with significant disparities for women from Asian or mixed ethnic backgrounds. At the height of the pandemic, disabled women were [between twice and 3.5 times more likely](#) than non-disabled women to die from a Covid-related cause.

Although health is devolved, decisions taken by the UK Government have a strong impact on gender health inequalities in Wales. Health inequalities are [driven by socio-economic disadvantage](#), which is especially severe in Wales, while many levers to address this sit with the UK Government (as detailed in the section Fair Finance). In addition, many women who live near the border access healthcare in England, a significant number of healthcare professionals who work in Wales are trained in England and much research and clinical trials are run on a UK-wide basis.

We are calling on all parties to:

- Prioritise equal and timely access to health services for women;
- Invest in high quality research into women's health and treatment and ensure that UK-based clinical trials include 50% women;
- Ensure all patient-facing healthcare practitioners receive mandatory training related to the health needs of women and groups with other protected characteristics;
- Introduce a legal obligation for employers to offer support and reasonable adjustments for those affected by symptoms of menstrual health conditions or menopause, and for those going through fertility treatment;
- Introduce paid leave for those who experience miscarriage in the first 24 weeks of pregnancy;
- Address socio-economic disadvantage as a key driver of health inequalities in Wales.

5. Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

The [Crime Survey for England and Wales](#) found that, in the year ending March 2022, an estimated 1.7 million women experienced domestic abuse and the pandemic saw an increase of all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Wales. [Data from Welsh Women's Aid](#) showed a 22% increase in contacts from survivors and 43% increase in contacts from concerned others in 2021. Due to a lack of capacity or resources, an increasing number of survivors had to be turned away, including women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

Structural misogyny is endemic in many public sector bodies, including the criminal justice system and [family courts](#). Across the UK, conviction rates for [rape and sexual assault](#) have almost halved between 2016-17 and 2020-21. Police systematically fail to act [on domestic abuse reports](#), including in cases perpetrated by [their own officers](#), and Black and ethnic minority victims are being disproportionately dismissed. The Welsh Government pursues a [whole-system approach](#) that focuses on prevention, protection and support, but currently lacks devolved power over justice and policing, which is sorely needed to successfully implement this approach.

We are calling on all parties to:

- Devolve powers over justice and policing to Wales to ensure women in Wales can benefit from a joined-up approach tailored to the Welsh context;
- Make misogyny a hate crime;
- Identify and eliminate structural misogyny across the public sector, including within the criminal justice system and family courts;
- Ensure all staff in the police and courts are appropriately trained by specialist services to deal with gender-based violence, domestic abuse and stalking in a trauma-informed way;
- Expand the Support for Migrant Victims pilot and set up a permanent crisis fund to support survivors who experience financial hardship, including women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF);

- Provide equal protection for women regardless of immigration status, by removing the reservation of article 59 of the Istanbul Convention and abolishing NRPF;
- Implement a firewall between Immigration Enforcement and statutory services;
- Split payments as default for Universal Credit (UC) to prevent financial abuse and introduce an exemption for survivors who have a change of circumstances due to violence and abuse from repaying advance UC payments;
- Encourage the Independent Press Standards Organisation to adopt strong ethical standards on reporting on violence against women and girls (VAWG);
- Ensure better data collection on VAWG, including data disaggregation for Wales and for different forms of VAWG, and consistent demographic categories across government bodies.

6. Women's Rights

Many hard-won women's rights, including equal pay legislation and employment protections for pregnancy, maternity and of part-time workers, are underpinned by retained EU legislation, and [have come under threat](#) by the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act.

The UK's ['hostile environment' approach](#) puts migrant women at an increased risk of destitution, abuse and exploitation in various context including, relationships, employment and housing, with a significant impact on their mental and physical health.

Women in Wales and across the UK were shocked by the decision to sentence a mother-of-three to [28 months in prison](#) for using abortion pills to end her own pregnancy after the legal limit. Although the prison sentence [has since been overturned](#), urgent legal change is needed to remove the thread of criminal prosecution for women in Great Britain. While a 2019 vote of Westminster MPs amended the law in Northern Ireland to decriminalise abortion, the rest of the UK remains governed by archaic legislation dating back over 50 years.

The loss of EU structural funds has left a gaping hole in the pockets of third sector organisations who provide vital services in Wales. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) betrayed promises to fill this gap due to a total disregard for inequalities based on characteristics like gender or race. Urgent action is needed to support the women's sector which is already missing out on funding – in 2021, [just 1.8% of the total value of grants](#) awarded in the UK went to women's and girls' organisations.

Proposals to amend the Equality Act to restrict the definition of the protected characteristic of sex to biological sex constitutes another major threat to hard-won women's rights. It would [limit the law's capacity](#) to address discrimination based on social norms and stereotypes, remove basic legal protections for trans people and encourage discrimination and harassment of women perceived as gender nonconforming.

We are calling on all parties to:

- Ensure all rights women currently enjoy under retained EU legislation are carried over into domestic law;
- Urgently bring forward legislation to decriminalise women who end their own pregnancy in England and Wales, as Westminster has already done for Northern Ireland;
- Incorporate the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women's (CEDAW) into UK law;

- Provide appropriate funding to the women's sector and the wider equality sector to fill gaps from the loss of EU structural funding;
- End the 'hostile environment' policy and fulfil the UK's global obligation to provide appropriate support for all refugees, including climate refugees;
- Commit to not restricting the Equality Act's definition of sex in terms of biological sex.

Disclaimer: This manifesto was produced by the Gender Network, a policy forum of 80 third sector representatives, activists and academics administered by the Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales. Although it has been produced collaboratively in consultation with all members, membership in the Gender Network does not necessarily constitute an endorsement of every single policy position in this document.