

Fairness, equity and opportunity: Green Party policies of particular concern to women

Green Party 2010 general election policy briefing

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1. Current inequality

1.1 Women in Britain still suffer disadvantage in all areas of life. Women working full-time on average earn 17% less than men working full-time; for part-time workers the gap is 36% an hour. Retired women's incomes are on average 40% less than men's.

1.2 Fewer than 20% of Westminster MPs are female; less than 11% of board members on major British companies are female.

1.3 Women still carry out the majority of unpaid work in the home, and in total on average work considerably more hours than men.

1.4 One in four women is subjected to domestic violence in her lifetime, and rape and sexual assault are a societal blight, with significant under-reporting of cases, and only six out of 100 cases that are reported to police resulting in a conviction. Violence against women costs our society £40bn a year, and the psychological and personal costs are enormous.

2. Women as workers and pensioners

2.1 The Green Party recognises that work consists of many tasks other than those that are now paid. Women (and men) who take time out of paid work for family or caring responsibilities are making an essential contribution to our society, and are gaining skills and experience that deserve to be recognised. They should not be penalised for this. Also, all jobs should be arranged so that every worker can maintain a decent work-life balance, so also has time for family, social and community life. Full-time UK employees work the longest average hours in Europe, 43.5 hours as against 38.2 in France and 39.9 in Germany. The Green Party wants a 35-hour working week, to help improve people's work/life balance and help to share out work.

2.2 Greens argue for the introduction of a citizens' income scheme. This would end the traps that can make returning to paid work, or doing part-time work, currently unsustainable or

financially impossible, particularly for single parents. With a citizens' income scheme it would become worthwhile for currently unemployed people to take those small, part-time or informal jobs that the present system penalises: initial extra income would only be taxed at only 20% compared to an effective rate of around 66% in the existing system because of benefit withdrawal. And there would be no intrusion by the state into people's personal circumstances to assess their eligibility, as the citizens' income would not be means-tested.

2.3 The Greens also argue for a non-means-tested citizen's pension set at 60% of the median national income, currently £170 a week, which would immediately lift pensioners, particularly women, out of poverty, and end the need for low-income pensioners to apply for extra help, which many choose not to, or are unable to.

2.4 Low pay leaves many workers struggling with several jobs, or unable to meet their basic needs. The current minimum wage is inadequate, particularly in more expensive parts of the country, where the Green Party has been campaigning hard for a living wage. Women make up more than two-thirds of the workers now struggling along on £5.83 an hour. Until the introduction of the citizen's income, we would support a national minimum wage of 60% of net national average earnings (currently £8.17 an hour.)

2.3 The Green Party supports the introduction of a law to ensure that boards of major companies are at least 40% female, on the model already successfully implemented in Norway, and currently being considered in France. Further, we would insist that all large and medium-size companies carry out equal pay audits, and redress inequalities uncovered; and that the law be changed to make joint suits for equal pay cases simpler. In Norway, a study of women on the boards found that the women the companies had been forced to accept were actually better qualified than even the remaining men. And if companies knew this provision was on the way, or even likely, they would be forced to develop, train and encourage appropriate individuals along the career ladder, which would have positive impacts even below board level.

3. Women and family

3.1 The Green Party wants major improvements in maternity services. A full range of birth options must be available to all women, and all women should be entitled to the care of a single midwife throughout their maternity experience and post-natally. (*See More empowerment, greater choice and higher standards of care: Green Party proposals for improving maternity services. Green Party 2010 general election policy briefing.*)

3.3 Greens are concerned that breastfeeding rates in the UK are currently well below WHO recommendations, with just 42% of babies being breastfed at 6 weeks, 29% at 4 months and just 22% at 6 months of age. We would insist on excellent support for all mothers who choose to breastfeed, and significant penalties to ensure they are not harassed when feeding their children in public, similar to the law already in effect in Scotland.

3.4 As well as fighting for more generous maternity and paternity leave, Green Party policy is to support and enhance Sure Start centres, which help many women and men with parenting. Our proposed citizens' income scheme would replace the current child benefit, but in the meantime Greens argue for a higher rate of child benefit, to more closely reflect the cost of rearing a child.

4. Security and rights

4.1 The Green Party argues for a model policy for dealing with domestic abuse (including domestic violence), which recognises that the needs and desires of the victims must be paramount, and that all service providers who come into contact with potentially vulnerable women need to be trained to provide appropriate assistance.

4.3 Green MPs would fight to ensure that rape crisis centres and domestic violence centres receive guaranteed funding from core budgets. Currently, most have to exist on short-term funding that leaves them insecure and often unstable. Such centres should be regarded as a basic service that the government must ensure is available to every woman and man who needs it. The Greens also want a national rape crisis hotline to ensure that immediate support and advice was available to any victim of sexual violence at any time they need it. In London, Green Party assembly member Jenny Jones has been at the forefront of the drive to get mayor Boris Johnson to fulfil his manifesto pledge to fund four rape crisis centres.

4.4 Green Party leader Caroline Lucas MEP has supported calls for a new approach to gendered violence across the European Union, backing proposals for a Europe-wide system of restraint orders aimed at curbing attacks on women, a reworking of crime statistics to highlight the problem, and for EU legislation to protect women across borders.

4.3 The Green Party wants to improve contraceptive provision and sex education, which could reduce the number of abortions that occur in England and Wales. Greens are concerned that women seeking an abortion who can afford to “go private” can receive a swifter, and hence medically safer, procedure. The Greens want to abolish the current law that requires the consent of two doctors for an abortion. The Greens believe appropriately-qualified midwives and nurses should be able to perform abortions, with the aim of improving access to NHS facilities. Currently women seeking an abortion face waits of up to seven weeks, and nearly 10% of abortions are carried out privately.

4.4 The Green Party argues for an asylum policy that particularly recognises the potential risks to, and needs of, women seeking asylum, including forced marriage, female genital mutilation and domestic violence.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The Green Party has had representation in the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and the London Assembly for the last decade. And during that time, the number of Green Party local councillors around the country has approximately trebled. Now, for the first time ever, the 2010 general election sees the Green Party having a real chance to elect MPs in some parts of the country, where a very high level of support has been built up. This briefing has shown what policies Green MPs will fight for in the House of Commons, and what the Green Party will continue to campaign for beyond this year’s general election.

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