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NAW annual general meeting

THE NAW annual general meeting, held on Saturday 7 November was a successful if somewhat unusual event. Like many other meetings during this extraordinary year, it was held using Zoom, the virtual communication provider. Caroline Underhill from Thompsons Solicitors was the main speaker and having been involved in the high-profile, equal pay claim brought by TV Presenter Salmira Ahmed against the BBC, Caroline was perfectly placed to reflect on the 50th Anniversary of the Equal Pay Act. A lively discussion followed Caroline's contribution as delegates reflected on past equal pay struggles and the social and economic problems we now face in the light of the current pandemic. Holding a virtual AGM enabled many sisters to participate without leaving the warmth and security of their own home, which was great. However, we were aware that many of our members, unfamiliar with this form of technology, missed out on an interesting and informative presentation so Caroline's full speech is included in this issue of *Sisters*.

The emergency motion (right) prompted a thoughtful discussion and was passed unanimously. Despite the fear and huge challenges created by the Covid-19 pandemic, delegates took heart at the way in which communities had come together to support each other and the positive role played by the trade union movement in negotiating with the government to support workers and protect jobs.

Delegates welcomed the work done by the Women's Budget Group in setting out the need to create a caring economy following the social and economic devastation caused by the pandemic. This was highlighted by the crisis in the care sector, which had recorded the highest number of deaths and struggled to find adequate personal protective equipment. The handing over of millions of pounds of vital health contracts to the private sector without scrutiny, often to mates of Tory MPs was condemned, illustrating how even in a crisis capitalism continues to serve the rich.

The 2019/20 Annual Report, which included the Finance Report was endorsed and thanks given to Carolyn Simpson for her sterling work as Treasurer. The NAW website is now regularly updated after EC member, Megan Dobney stepped in to liaise with GreenNet on the redesign. Appreciation was also given to outgoing President, Anita Wright for her steady hand in guiding the work of the NAW over the past five years. Rose Keeping takes over as President, with Sandra Durkin and Carolyn Simpson remaining as Secretary and Treasurer respectively. The EC was elected unopposed and comprises Siobhan Endean; Megan Dobney; Liz Payne; Bernadette Keaveney; Mollie Brown; Anita Wright and Yvonne Washbourne.

covid and its impact on women

EVEN before the Covid-19 pandemic, women were disproportionately affected by 10 years of government austerity policies. Women constitute the majority of people living in poverty, are more likely to be in low paid or insecure employment and struggling with debt. Women carry out the majority of unpaid work, caring for children, elderly and vulnerable adults and are at a higher risk of domestic violence. The pandemic and the Government's disastrous handling of the crisis has compounded these problems.

health and social care

77% of health workers and 88% of social care workers are women. The shortage and unequal distribution of appropriate personal protective equipment placed them and their families at risk, particularly for BAME staff. Six in 10 health workers killed by Covid-19 in the first phase were from BAME communities.

NHS funding and staffing levels

Years of underfunding of the NHS, staff shortages and privatisation risked our NHS being overpowered by the demands placed on it during the pandemic. NHS workers, including outsourced departments, cleaners and catering staff tirelessly worked long hours and on wages that do not reflect their social worth during this pandemic.

social care provision

The shocking state of our social care provision was starkly exposed during the crisis with over 20,000 care home residents dying as a result of the virus between March and June 2020. The plethora of private care providers made it difficult to co-ordinate the distribution of PPE and ensure the safety of residents and staff.

young women workers

The closure of restaurants, retail shops and leisure facilities has affected young women workers to a greater extent than young men – 36% compared to 25% [Institute of Fiscal Studies]. These sectors already operate on low wages so coping on reduced money during the furlough or risk of future redundancy affects women more than men.

domestic abuse

Calls to the Domestic Abuse Helpline have increased by 25% since the lockdown in March 2020. The Government already estimated that the societal cost of domestic abuse is £66 million each year. The overwhelming majority of those suffering domestic abuse are women – 1.6 million women a year ending March 2019 [ONS]. Funding for refuges falls far short of what is urgently needed to support this desperate demand for help.

benefits and Universal Credit

The benefit system, particularly the roll-

out of Universal Credit, was a shambles prior to the lockdown. In July 2019 there were 2.3 million people on Universal Credit of which 53% were women. By April 2020 this had risen to 4.2 million [Gov.UK]. The huge fall in household income has inevitably led to a massive rise in child poverty.

women's employment

There has been little change in the gender pay gap since 2012 [Office of National Statistics] and despite it being grounds for unfair dismissal 54,000 women a year may lose their job due to pregnancy or maternity. As the lockdown is eased women's employment rights are likely to be at even greater risk. Employers should be mandated to set out their health and safety policies in respect of social distancing and appropriate PPE where needed, fully involving trade unions and/or the HSE. Employees should be free from intimidation in exercising their employment rights if they believe they are at risk. Years of funding cuts to local authorities and the HSE must be reinstated to enable and enforce this.

The NAW rejects the corroding values associated with rampant consumerism and avaricious individualism. We have seen how local people have come together to support each other during the pandemic and applaud this desire to act collectively in the interests of the wider community.

We will oppose any attempt by the Government to use austerity as a way out of the economic downturn and demand that the economy is rebuilt through growth including but not exclusively the following:

1. Investment in environmentally and socially useful industries, businesses and social enterprise including bringing back into public ownership essential utilities and transport.
2. A substantial increase in funding for the NHS. A halt to privatisation and bringing back in-house previously outsourced services. A full salary review and reinstatement of bursaries for student doctors, nurses and other health professionals.
3. The reinstatement of the legal duty and necessary funding for local councils to provide social care and give them the power to take over care providers, employing staff on comparable NHS pay and conditions.
4. A full review of the Universal Credit and sickness benefit schemes to create a strong social security system that ensures people can live without slipping into debt and/or poverty.
5. Fully funded free child care provision including for early years; before/after school provision with proper staffing levels and training support.
6. Funding to support specialist Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) providers and a review of police and criminal justice procedures relating to VAWG.

equal pay **still fighting for equality**

AS EQUAL PAY PRACTICE LEAD FOR THOMPSONS SOLICITORS, CAROLINE UNDERHILL OVERSEES THE EQUAL PAY TEAMS IN ALL THE REGIONS, RUNNING ON AVERAGE OVER 60,000 CLAIMS PER YEAR. THIS INCLUDES THE MASS LITIGATION CASES IN THE NHS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

NAW SISTERS WERE DELIGHTED THAT SHE AGREED TO SPEAK AT OUR AGM ON THE OCCASION OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1970 EQUAL PAY ACT

THANKYOU for inviting me to speak to you. I suspect that I may have been invited because a bit of stardust sprinkled on me from the successful claim by Samira Ahmed against the BBC a year ago! Samira Ahmed was supported by the NUJ and her claim was one of hundreds they have pursued.

I work at Thompsons solicitors. We work on cases for members of many of the trades unions are proud of our connection with the trade unions. This goes back to our very foundation in 1921. We will be celebrating our centenary next year. The founder of Thompsons had a close connection with the Poplar councillors, a group of councillors who cared about the men and women who worked for the council and the men and women of their borough. They went to prison for their action on their principles that men and women should receive a decent living wage and that men and women should receive equal pay. They were surcharged and imprisoned because judges thought it was so unreasonable to pay a decent and equal wage that it was illegal. They reflected the prevailing view at the time although not the universal view. We have tried to carry on the aims and purpose of the founders of Thompsons.

Your organisation was founded in 1952 to achieve full social, legal, political and cultural independence and equality for women. I suspect that was a reflection of the increasing demand for equality in the first 50 years of the 20th century. In 1952 we were at the start of the post war boom but peace for the world was fragile not least because of the rising struggles for independence. The first 50 years of the 20th century had seen significant struggles by and changes for women.

In England the demands for equal pay for women that began in the TUC in 1888 were growing and the involvement of women at work in the war meant and several Royal Commission on equal pay meant that pressure was building. The civil service and teachers won equal pay in the mid 1950s. In 1956 the ILO treaty on equal pay was adopted by the nascent European Community. We had the vote but were still treated as second class citizens. This culminated in the women's movement of the late 60s and then the Ford Dagenham strike in 1969. The result was the Equal Pay Act 1970.

The Act had many failings but it, by the time it was in force in 1975, made a real



difference to women's lives. No longer were there women's rates and men's rates for the same jobs. Married women received the same pay and with the protection of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 could no longer be sacked when they got married. But equality had still not been achieved.

In 1984 as a result of a legal challenge in Europe by the then Equal Opportunities Commission the Equal Pay Act 1970 was amended so that we were entitled to equal pay for doing jobs that were different from men but were of equal value. That year Thompsons solicitors represented Julie Hayward, a union member, in one of the first claims under the equal value amendment. She was a cook in the Cammell Laird shipyard. She claimed equal pay with painters, joiners and a thermal insulation engineer. She won in 1984 but the employers carried on fighting the case until it got to the House of Lords (now the Supreme Court) in 1988. The very idea of value and equality was so difficult to understand that lawyers could argue about it and whether the findings of an expert who assessed the jobs could be accepted. They then argued about what pay terms could be compared and whether they could offset the better holiday she got. Every equal pay claim ever since has been as big a fight but each time the lawyers on behalf of the employers try to undo the Equal Pay Act (Equality Act) by saying that it does not mean what it says, or that jobs are not equal or that the market is forcing them to pay people differently.

The Equality Act 2010 did not change things much so we are still here, about 50 years on, still faced with the fact that many women are not paid the same as men for doing equal work. Without the trades unions, such as the NUJ who

backed Samira Ahmed's case, it would be much more difficult if not impossible for many women to bring claims or argue with their employer for equal pay.

The law is imperfect. It is difficult to understand. It is hard to enforce because the concepts in the law of equal value are difficult to translate into everyday life. The concept of value and worth does not have much to do with how pay is set by employers. Equality of pay between men and women is just one part of that big picture. There are other inequalities that impact on the position of women and their worth. This was amply illustrated by the publication of gender pay gaps by organisations employing more than 250 people. Organisations who pay people equally at each relevant grade in their organisation found that they had large gender pay gaps because there were more women at the bottom of the organisation than at the top.

The gender pay gap among full-time employees stands at 8.9%, little changed from 2018, and a decline of only 0.6 percentage points since 2012. The gender pay gap among all employees fell from 17.8% in 2018 to 17.3% in 2019, and continues to decline [National Office for Statistics].

So we keep on keeping on. This year the inequalities have been thrown into sharp relief by the impact of Covid-19 measures. But it has also thrown into sharp relief, to those who wish to look, the disconnect between value and worth and pay rates. The nurses, cleaners, porters and others working in the NHS, the carers and agency workers in the care industry, transport workers, food distribution workers and shop assistants were in the front line of keeping people

continued overleaf

well, safe and with the necessities of life. In general these are all the lowest paid in our society and the majority of them, other than in transport and distribution, are women.

Cleaning, which has to be the bedrock of any steps taken to reduce risk in workplaces up and down the country, is mainly done by women. It is a notoriously badly paid and insecure job.

Women are bearing the brunt of the schools and childcare being closed/unavailable. This is in part structural but it is also because even within our daily lives and domestic relationships the old assumptions about roles are hard to shift. Single parents, most of whom are women, are particularly hard hit by the pressures that Covid-19 has brought. "Customer facing industries" – catering and shop work for example – facing, with others, the brunt of the closures due to the first lock down, restrictions over the summer and now the second lock down. Most workers in these industries are women.

The child care industry is an industry particularly hard hit. They have not had the focus that schools have had. Their businesses usually operate on a shoestring. It is hard to see what will happen and if there is no affordable local child care many women may find working outside the home too difficult. This will impact on incomes and wellbeing.

Women have been affected in other ways by the pressure on family life and relationships by the pressures of Covid as the stories from refugees tell us.

We don't yet know what the effect will be for the new generation of school leavers and graduates who are coming out of full time education into the world of work but it is a world of work that is not normal. What the long term effect of this will be is hard to tell.

There will be challenges to the impact of Covid-19 on women and on Black and Minority Ethnic people and on those that are poorer. The Equality and Human Rights Commission published on 20 October 2020 a research report on the impact and call for action to be taken to address the inequalities. It is available on their website.

It is too early to tell what the medium or long term effects of this will be. The reports and statistics are still being created and studied. You will be talking today about Covid and the impact on women but I will just return to some of the persistent problems that seem to stop us achieving equal pay because this will continue to be a problem.

What seems to continue to adversely affect women in relation to pay is:

1. Undervaluing jobs/low pay. These tend to be jobs that are done part time or are jobs where the majority of those that do the work are women.
2. Job segregation between employers – contracting out of lower paid service

based work such as cleaning and the barriers women face to get into engineering, science, technology or other "non caring" roles.

3. The parenthood penalty. The difficulty of combining work with raising the next generation.

4. What is sometimes called "the market" but is in fact just the shadow that falls on us from the past. The tendency of employers to pay a little bit more or around the level that the person was earning before. This will necessarily mean that the differences in the past continue into the future.

The law has made a difference but it is not effective enough.

1. The effect of the Gender Pay Gap reporting regulations at the level of individual businesses will not always be visible. It is likely that it has had some effect.

2. The Equality Act 2010 and its predecessor legislation certainly had an impact but there are problems with the law:

- a. It relies on individuals to enforce the law without funding or information unless they are members of a union (who are less likely to suffer unequal pay) and gives only an individual solution.
- b. Pay is private and confidential so it is very hard to find out what the rate for the job is – what everyone who does the job is paid.
- c. Unless there is an agreed pay and grading scheme it is hard to understand how pay is decided.
- d. It has been too easy for an employer to justify unequal pay – in particular the market forces defence is still alive and kicking.
- e. There is no fair pay law.
- f. The law is not simple and easy to understand.
- g. The law is not easy to enforce unless you are rich or a member of a trade union.
- h. Unlike other anti-discrimination rights the Tribunal cannot award "injury to feelings" or personal injury damages.

Baroness Prosser introduced a private bill in the House of Lords earlier this year to address some of these issues. There has been no second reading.

Cases can win and can make a difference particularly if they are part of a wider challenge to injustices. Unions such as my colleagues in Unison have been at the forefront of the battles for equal pay and bringing cases for their members as well as fighting for proper fair graded pay as part of collective agreements. I am proud to work with them.

The law is only part of the struggle for equality. It is only part of the wider movement for change. I leave you with that challenge – make the change happen.



MARION SHARPLES IS PROJECT MANAGER OF THE COMMISSION ON A GENDER-EQUAL ECONOMY AT THE UK WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP. SHE WAS DUE TO SPEAK AT THE NAW SEMINAR, CANCELLED BECAUSE OF THE PANDEMIC, SO HERE PRESENTS THE COMMISSION'S WORK ON CREATING A CARING ECONOMY

ACROSS the UK, we find ourselves in a unique moment in global history: reeling from the first wave of a deadly pandemic, in the midst of fighting the second wave, and perched on the precipice of a deep and brutal recession.

There was never a better time to ask: **do we really want to go back to business as usual?**

The Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, in its final report *Creating a caring economy: a call to action*, published in autumn 2020, calls for the creation of a caring economy: an economy that is focused on gender equality, sustainability and wellbeing, rather than an economy that is focused primarily on growth.

an economy with care at its heart

A caring economy would prioritise care of one another and our environment, ensure that everyone has time to care for loved ones, as well as having time free from caring responsibilities. A caring economy would make it possible for men to share in unpaid caring responsibilities equally. We all give and receive care at some point in our lives, and a caring economy is one that not only recognises, but values, this.

a caring economy is within reach

We have seen that during the coronavirus pandemic, care and kindness have come to the fore. Almost overnight, people flocked to their doorsteps to clap for carers, to check in with vulnerable neighbours and to pin up pictures of NHS rainbows. We know that it's key workers who have kept us going: low-paid carers, nurses, shelf-stackers, cleaners and delivery drivers. Many of these workers had previously been branded 'unskilled' earlier in the year, but as a result of the pandemic, they were heralded as heroes and the value of their work was appreciated like perhaps never before.

We have also seen that government intervention is possible – and powerful. When confronted by the pandemic, gov-

creating a caring economy

ernments across the four nations chose to put people's health first. The introduction of widespread restrictions massively reduced economic output, but sought to ensure people would be safe. It has shown how we can realign economic priorities according to what is needed by society. It has shown that the economy is not a black box, something we cannot understand or influence. We are the economy – and we can do things differently.

It is not that what the pandemic has revealed is wholly new. But Covid-19 has illuminated and intensified existing intersecting inequalities and shown that crises do not impact everyone equally. The virus has hit the most marginalised the hardest. Structural inequality is embedded in our society, and bold, concerted action to eliminate it is required. Our report offers hope that we can do better and create a caring economy that remedies these failures.

steps to a caring economy

Creating a caring economy: a call to action outlines eight areas of the economy that require transformation, ranging from the fundamentals of how we understand 'the economy', to areas such as public services, taxation and social security, to overhauling the international trade and financial systems. In practical terms, this means an economy in which workers' rights are respected, people have secure, well-paid and meaningful work, including equal entitlements to care leave. It's an economy in which the gender pay gap is closed, the standard working week is shortened, and 'green' jobs are prioritised as valued career paths.

In a caring economy, government spending on high quality paid care services and social security is a crucial investment in the health and wellbeing of people now and in the future. In a caring economy, taxes are seen as a contribution to creating the public services and social security we all need and benefit from, and corporations pay their fair share.

a call to action

The report is a call to action because it recognises that a caring economy cannot be created overnight. It calls on governments at all levels, businesses (both large firms and small cooperatives and social enterprises), unions, charities and community organisations. Working together, across the four nations of the UK, at every level, we can design and demand a new economy: an economy which has the wellbeing of individuals, communities and the planet at its centre; an economy which values care, both paid and unpaid, as the activities that nurture us all; an economy which ensures that no-one faces discrimination, violence, or poverty, and in which no-one is left – or pushed – behind.

EIGHT STEPS TO A CARING ECONOMY



the public wants a caring economy

We also know that there are high levels of public support for a caring economy. Polling conducted for the Women's Budget Group in September 2020 revealed that 68% of people in the UK believe that wellbeing should be used to measure the success of economic policy, and 79% agree that a better balance is needed between paid work, caring responsibilities, and free time. Two in three agree that the government should encourage and financially support men to provide more care – rising to nearly three in four among men aged 18-44. Over half

believe investment in social care, health and education is more important to the future of the economy than investment in transport and technology.

the time for a caring economy has come

While the ideas behind a caring economy have been a long time coming, they are now imperative, drawing on the lessons learnt from the Covid-19 crisis and reflecting what people across the UK want to see: an economy which puts people and planet first.

MORE ON THE WBG AT WBG.ORG.UK

Phyllis Birch



NAW members will be saddened to hear that Phyllis Birch died in September after a short illness. Phyllis joined the NAW in her 60s and was active in the Sheffield branch as well as being elected to the NAW Executive Committee. Our sincere condolences go to her daughter Pat.

women and class

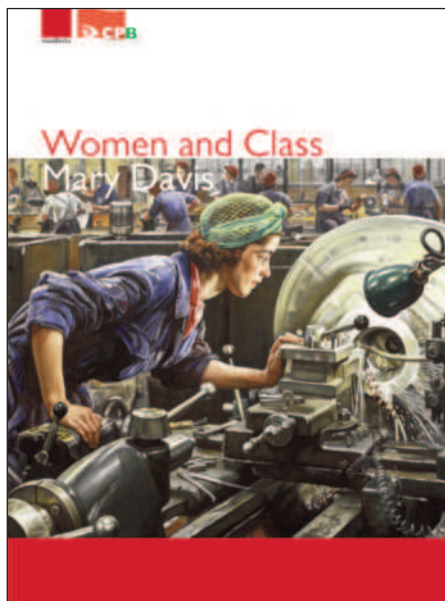
LIZ PAYNE REVIEWS THE NEW EDITION
OF *WOMEN AND CLASS* BY PROFESSOR
MARY DAVIS

THE launch of the fourth edition of *Women and Class*, first published in 1990, takes place at a critical time for women and their organised struggle for justice and equality.

Already disproportionately disadvantaged after years of disastrous neo-liberal attacks, women now face the double impact of a spiralling economic crisis of capitalism and a grossly mishandled Covid-19 pandemic. These have exposed women workers to increased super-exploitation and intensified their sex-based oppression.

How the women's movement against oppression might be rejuvenated and built in the light of current challenges, based on sound understanding of the inherent relationship of that oppression to the class struggle is the subject of this book. Mary Davis sums up that inter-relationship concisely in her introduction: "The super-exploitation of women as workers and their oppression as women is a fundamental prerequisite for the operation of capitalism – economically, politically and ideologically". The oppression of women and black people of all classes, based on their obvious physical characteristics, biological sex and skin colour respectively, fuelled by the potent and universally accepted ruling class ideologies of sexism and racism, create and perpetuate the material conditions in which exploitation can take place by dividing, disorientating, and disempowering the working class.

In the first chapter, readers are introduced to the origins of women's oppression from the Marxist perspective. Davis is clear that it came into being only with the coming of ownership of private property in class antagonistic societies and was not, as many theories insist, aboriginal – men, strong and violent by nature, and women, physically weak and vulnerable. In the second and third chapters, the author examines rival theories and the Marxist response. She shows how the former lead to dead ends. According to biological determinism, the roles of the sexes are dictated by nature and are immutable. Liberal feminism seeks to find equality within the capitalist system; every woman can smash through the glass ceiling if only she gives her mind to it. Radical feminism holds that the enemy of women is men and will always be so. Socialist feminism accepts the link between women's oppression and class society but also sees men as the protagonists. Diversity theory seeks to accommodate diversity within capitalist organisations, making a business case for managing it, while post-feminism holds that feminism is redundant, its goals having already been achieved. The individualistic theory of intersectionality stresses that



we each have a set of identity components: sex, race, age, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, etc. Class is simply one of these, rather than the underlying cause of the problem.

In a new section, Davis delivers a robust repudiation of the most recent manifestation of identity politics, which concerns sex, gender and identity, and the promotion of gender self-identity.

The third chapter contains the author's central development of Marxist feminist theory, as is perhaps the most important in the book. Here, Davis makes an analysis of oppression, the universalised ruling class ideologies of oppression that perpetuate it, the relationship between the oppressed groups – women and black people – to the class structure, and women's role in the family and domestic labour.

Next, Davis moves to an historical and political overview of women workers, the women's movement and working-class women and the labour movement during the 19th and 20th centuries. She takes a fresh look at the impacts of the industrial revolution and the development of factories on women's oppression and exploitation. Then she examines the growth of the women's struggle, including the suffragettes and Sylvia Pankhurst. The final section of this chapter is especially interesting; it looks into many frequently side-lined narratives, including the remarkable contribution of Eleanor Marx to the organisation of unskilled and lower paid workers in the late 19th century and the landmark collective struggles of women workers, from the victorious strike of the east London match workers in 1888 to those of the women at Ford Dagenham in 1968 (for regrading) and Trico in 1976 (for equal pay).

The fifth chapter concentrates on the same themes as the fourth but focussing on the 21st century. Women constitute approximately 70% of the workforce, performing essential roles in production but

they make up two thirds of Britain's low paid. They are twice as likely as men to be poor; poverty has been feminised. Seventy years after the Equal Pay Act, the gap between part-time women and full-time male workers stands at 41%. Davis concludes with the exhortation that "women need a movement of their own as much as they have ever done", a new and revived women's liberation movement with the Charter for Women (pages 66-67), now under the auspices of the National Assembly of Women (NAW), at its heart.

The final chapter looks at the hitherto substantially forgotten/hidden history of women of the Communist Party – both in the organisation and the wider labour and women's movements. Included is that Communist women played a major role in establishing the National Assembly of Women (NAW) in 1952 and in its subsequent work. At its last Congress, the Party became the first to adopt a Marxist, class-based position on women, sex and gender, and gender self-identification. It focuses on "the need to distinguish between discrimination of trans people and oppression of women"; the latter being inextricably linked with class exploitation but not the former.

Women and Class exhorts us to understand, develop and disseminate Marxist feminist theory in order to challenge the powerful ruling class ideology of women's oppression and provide a framework for struggle against that oppression and the exploitative capitalist system it serves. The NAW will certainly want to take up the challenge.

MARY DAVIS *WOMEN AND CLASS* (2020)

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Three quarters of a century in
the cause of peace, women's
rights and the wellbeing of
children everywhere

Founded 1 December 1945 in Paris

The NAW sends greetings to
our sisters of the WIDF
Secretariat and all affiliated
organisations worldwide.

May sisterhood, solidarity and
the struggle for women's
equality and socialism
continue!

women demand change in **lebanon**

A huge economic collapse and the ravages of the COVID pandemic had already swept over Lebanon when, on 4 August 2020, the people of Beirut were struck by a terrible catastrophe. It is almost impossible to find words to express the horror of what happened that day. The blast, which wrought destruction over 10 kilometres from the epicentre in every direction, was felt in Turkey and Israel and heard in Syria and Cyprus. With the force of a nuclear bomb, it produced the largest and most devastating non-nuclear explosion in human history.

For the Lebanese people, the blast and its aftermath are a "national catastrophe". The dead were counted in hundreds, the injured in thousands and the traumatised in tens of thousands. Hospitals, schools, community centres and the public infrastructure of the city were destroyed, and more than a million inhabitants lost their homes. Many have no possibility of repairing them and are still living in temporary accommodation four months on. The political system has fallen into paralysis and organised government support and recovery systems are practically non-existent. This tragedy had, and continues to have, a profoundly disproportionate impact on women, which is hardly surprising given that Lebanon is in 139th place of 154 countries in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report 2020.

women's secondary status

According to Rachel Dore-Weeks, the representative of UN Women in Lebanon, "On average, women have fewer tools and resources to recover from external shocks. This is due to existing gender inequalities which relegate them as secondary to men... Women are more likely to not have bank accounts, savings, pensions and access to social protection". She added that women have one of the lowest rates of participation in the labour force of any country – 29%, by comparison with male participation at 76%. Following the pandemic and explosion, as many as 20% fewer women have paid employment and many have been rendered destitute. Not counted in these statistics are an estimated 300,000 migrant women domestic workers, mainly from Africa and Asia. They are not covered by the Labour Law and have found themselves at the mercy of their employers in the spiralling crisis, in some cases reduced to slavery without recourse to law to enforce the payment of wages they are owed and increasingly subject to violence and abuse, with many simply thrown onto the streets.

1.8 million refugees

Another group whose already precarious and marginalised situation has been worsened by the multiple crises of Lebanon has been the 1.8 million refugees, the majority of whom are



women and children. The country has the largest per capita Syrian refugee population in the world – almost 1.5 million. A further 300,000 are Palestinians. Before 4 August, it was estimated that some 60-65% lived in extreme poverty. Following the explosion, the figure has risen to 90-95%. The economic collapse has taken away the very precarious work they looked for on a day by day basis and left them without income, support, or status. This is compounded by discrimination, for example in the distribution of aid, and by abuse and violence as they are scapegoated and blamed for the country's ills.

endemic sectarian misogyny

I asked Marie Nassif-Debs, president of the Equality Wardah Boutros Association for Women's Rights in Lebanon about the position of women and the movement's hopes for the future. She told me that women are the poorest of the poor, held back by illiteracy and unemployment. Those that do have a job are largely in low paid work and the gender pay gap is huge. Marie felt sure that one of the main reasons for growing inequality was endemic misogyny, which in Lebanon arises from the sectarian political system and the various pieces of Muslim and Christian personal status legislation which treat the sexes very differently, ascribing an inferior status to women. Their secondary position is manifest throughout the public and private spheres and discrimination, harassment and violence are rife. She confirmed that the dual effects of the economic crash and pandemic had created job loss and poverty. Dismissal rates were high for women and a huge burden was falling them in terms of family and childcare duties. Marie was, however, sure that the women's movement would grow back strong after Covid-19 and said that a key emphasis would be on the demands of



working women for regulation of the labour market and social protection, without which there can be no progress towards women's equality.

What happened on 4 August and during the Covid-19 crisis exacerbated the complete breakdown of the economy, public infrastructure, and health services, but they did not cause them. Blame falls squarely on the shoulders of the ruling elite – the incompetence and disastrous policies of a dysfunctional government and political system serving the interests of a small and corrupt minority for the past 30 years. The contrast between the moneyed and powerful and the poor, in whose interests they do absolutely nothing, is vast and growing, with the richest 10% owning 71% of the wealth.

the fightback begins

Anger at the economic and political failures has been the focus of mass demonstrations and unrest since mid-October 2019. Now the people of Lebanon are demanding an end to corruption and sectarianism. They want no more of any of those who have held the reins of power and acted only on behalf of themselves and their foreign backers, while leaving the majority to scrape a living as best they can.

Women have been prominent in the protests. They have also worked tirelessly and cooperatively in their communities and neighbourhoods throughout what have been the worst of times. It has empowered them. Demands for women's rights, justice and equality are beginning to feature prominently. Women have found a voice and we send them our solidarity.

LIZ PAYNE IS AN NAW EXECUTIVE MEMBER AND LIAISES ON OUR BEHALF WITH THE WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION

National Assembly of Women weekend conference

SAVE THE DATE

**Saturday 12
& Sunday 13
June 2021**

Hillscourt Education
Centre, Rose Hill,
Rednal, Birmingham
B45 8RS
(National Headquarters
of the NASUWT)

For further information
and to reserve a place
email
naw@sisters.org.uk or
write to NAW, Bridge
House, Newport Street,
Hay on Wye, Powys
HR3 5BG

**The National Assembly of
Women sends seasonal
greetings to all members,
affiliates and supporters.**
**Let's continue the
campaign for peace,
equality and social justice
in 2021**

Sheila Abdullah a life well lived

We carried a tribute to Sheila in the Autumn edition of *Sisters* and on the 23 September 2020 *The Guardian* newspaper carried an obituary written by her daughter Wajda. The complete online tribute included a section which was edited out of the print version so to put the record straight here it is:

Sheila "continued to be active in organisations including Doctors for a Woman's Choice on Abortion, National Assembly of Women and Palestine Solidarity Campaign, and was a fierce opponent of the Iraq wars. As part of a humanitarian delegation she visited Baghdad in 2000 and met many of [her husband] Mohamed's family for the first time. Sheila had an enthusiasm for life and a passion for social justice and politics. She was a loyal friend and enjoyed travelling, writing essays crammed on to postcards from wherever she roamed."



what's on...

NAW Executive Committee
meetings are open to *all*
members. The next will be a
"virtual" meeting on
Saturday 9 January.
If you would like to attend
please contact the Secretary
on naw@sisters.org.uk or at
NAW, Bridge House,
Newport Street, Hay on
Wye, Powys HR3 5BG

join the NAW now!

*I would like to join the NAW. Here is £20 for the annual subscription (£10 unwaged) which includes my subscription to **sisters**, the journal of the NAW.*

Our organisation would like to affiliate to the NAW. Enclosed is:
£20 (local organisation/NAW branch), £45 (regional organisation), £60 (national)

Name _____

Address _____

postcode _____

Organisation _____

phone _____

email _____

Send to: NAW, c/o C Simpson, Unite, 33-37 Moreland Street, London EC1V 8BB