



# A Ministry For Women's Rights?

**JO RICHARDSON**  
Labour's proposals

**Shortly after her appointment as Labour's women's rights spokesperson, Jo Richardson MP set up a working group on Labour's plans for a Ministry of Women's Rights. Its current discussion document is the first attempt to consider the institutional measures a Labour government will have to introduce to achieve greater equality. Below, Jo Richardson outlines the main features of the document's proposals for a Ministry of Women's Rights and Nathalie Hadjifotiou, who works in a local authority women's committee, explores some of the issues the proposals raise.**

My experience over the last two years as Labour's spokesperson for women's rights has taught me many valuable lessons, but one shines out above all others. It is that there will be no point in carrying out our welcome commitment to appoint, under the next Labour government, a minister for women's rights unless she is backed by a strong and separate department to push forward a radical, well-thought-out programme to eradicate the continued discrimination women suffer, and to give women a clear voice in decision-making.

Why do we need a separate ministry? Why not simply designate junior ministers in departments dealing with, say, employment, education, and health and social services to 'keep an eye', as part of their duties, on problems facing women?

The answer is that we have *that* even under a Tory government - and look where it's got women. When I and others ask parliamentary questions pinpointing an area of disadvantage, a junior (male) minister will pop up with a specious reply. There is actually an advisory committee on women's employment, chaired by a junior minister at the Department of Employment, but it has only met once in the last two years. The women's national commission, based in the cabinet office, has produced some excellent reports, but the government has taken no notice. The

Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) (whose sponsoring department is the Home Office) has done some sterling work, but its recommendations to change our laws have fallen on deaf ears.

The women's committees of some local authorities have pioneered projects to help women. The government's response has been to ratecap local authorities or abolish them. The plain fact is that a piecemeal approach won't solve the problems.

Women still earn over 25% less than men. They are still largely segregated into a narrow range of low paid and unskilled jobs. They still have fewer opportunities than men for higher level education and training. They still lack childcare facilities and get inadequate support for dependents. They are still denied equal rights with men in many areas, including taxation, social security, pensions and super-annuation.

They still suffer prejudice and harassment in their paid working lives, and often in their homes. And women still have no say in areas which vitally affect them, such as transport, planning, housing and the environment.

Labour has a strong commitment to eradicate these inequalities, but it will need a co-ordinated approach if it is to be implemented. Our research into developments in other countries led us firmly to the conclusion that a crucial first step



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towards achieving our objectives *must* be the establishment of a Ministry for Women's Rights. Furthermore, our commitment to genuine equality must be central to our next general election manifesto. This will require a greater understanding of the issues by our existing spokespeople, and much more campaigning time devoted to them.

The ministry should be small, but high-powered, with a clear set of political priorities - and based on the cabinet office with access to the prime minister. The minister herself must have status and backing, and a seat in the cabinet and on key cabinet committees.

As a start, the ministry would need to play six main roles:

- 1 Take over some of the powers of the EOC, but develop stronger powers for the EOC in other ways.
- 2 Set up new regional equal opportunities units linking in with work in the communities.
- 3 Initiate and co-ordinate policies for sex equality in all government departments.
- 4 Use the government's issue of employment contracts, its provision of services, its powers of purchase and its resource allocation to influence the actions of local government and private employers.
- 5 Ensure that the government's own role as a large-scale employer is used to improve the position of women within the civil service and to set an example to other employers.
- 6 Ensure that women are represented in significant numbers on all government-appointed bodies.

In addition to producing its own legislation, the ministry must work closely with other government departments to ensure that they reflect and promote the measures necessary to achieve women's equality.

The ministry must have an identity in parliament, to be accountable, and to provide opportunities for women's views to be heard on all aspects of government policy. There should be a select committee to shadow it, and to give access to groups and organisations representing women to promote their views.

Above all the ministry must be open and responsive to ideas - and criticisms - from women. We have, as over 50% of the

population, been ignored, or marginalised throughout history. Women have been harrassed by overwork, looked on as second-class citizens or sex objects. Women's talents and wisdom have been undermined - and society has been the poorer for it.

Changing attitudes will be a slow and difficult job. The labour movement, and the next Labour government, must show through its policies and its actions that it is firmly committed to do so.