

## **NATHALIE HADJIFOTIOU**

### **A vision of equality**

Will women benefit from a Ministry of Women's Rights? The answer should be yes. For far too long parliament, the civil service and state organisations have acted as agents of women's oppression, creating law and policies which neither fit women's day-to-day lives, nor come anywhere near meeting our own aspirations.

To be successful, the new ministry must be central to Labour's overall strategy. Yet that is the key political objective which most local authority women's committees have still to achieve within their own councils. Radical changes require more than grafting on new policies to the traditional structures and activities of official decision-making. Securing formal rights in no way ensures all women have access to power and resources which turn these rights into a reality. In the US, where equal opportunities legislation is more developed, only a small proportion of women and blacks have benefited from positive action. What the proposal for a new ministry throws into sharp relief therefore is whether or not a future Labour government can build a new relationship between parliament, the civil service and the people.

With this agenda in mind, what pointers are there to the success of a Ministry of Women's Rights from the experiences of local women's committees. Both start from the view that state-sponsored discrimination cannot be challenged unless women have their own spaces within state institutions. A separate ministry, like local authority women's units, has the potential of giving women a collective, visible presence, an opportunity to speak for themselves in their own way in their own terms. But within the current set-up, that autonomy can only be partial and comes at a price - the danger of marginalisation. For women to change the rules, they have to be

listened to. To be heard, women are often forced to use the very rules which have oppressed them for so long.

In planning a Ministry of Women's Rights it must be recognised that methods of achieving change and the objects of change are indivisible. The Labour party's discussion document recognises this and recommends a range of inter-related measures about the functioning of the ministry.

It acknowledges that women's participation in its work will be essential for long-term success. Broadening the base of policy development and implementation beyond paid officials and traditional pressure groups, as local women's committees are attempting to do, is a vital step towards winning popular support for new initiatives and ensuring policy proposals meet women's needs. A London-based ministry, surrounded by organisations and vocal women's groups, will have to work hard to avoid an over-reliance on white professional women, by creating participatory structures which are geographically, financially and culturally accessible to black and working class women. One avenue for this may well be the proposed links with regional and local committees.

Involving a wider constituency of women in decision-making does, however, present a challenge to the Labour party's traditional commitment to party and parliamentary structures. The parliamentary Labour party's determination to retain its own autonomy and the national executive's reluctance to meet the aspirations of black party members suggests they may have difficulties in accepting policies from millions of women who are not Labour party members.

How will the new ministry influence policy in the big departments of state? Will its powers be advisory only or should the minister be able to veto anti-women proposals? Will focusing on sex inequality alienate women for whom class or race discrimination is a more central concern? And if women can directly influence the work of this ministry, what chance is there that other ministries directly affecting women's lives, like health, education, employment and social security, will open their doors?

What is exciting about the call for a Ministry of Women's Rights is its potential for shaping the sort of radical programme the Labour party needs to win the next election. It offers the opportunity to create a vision of democratic socialism which tackles the roots of inequality.

With confidence in parliamentary and state institutions shaken over Westland, a programme for accountable and open government could win popular support. How should the Department of Health and Social Services or the Department of Trade and Industry be re-organised to involve the people they service in their work? Potentially more explosive still, what would democratic accountability mean for the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office? In finding answers to these questions lies the long-term effectiveness of a Ministry of Women's Rights.