

15 September 2021

Dear Members of the Equality and Social Justice Committee,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Gender Network, a policy forum that brings together 34 third sector organizations as well as activists and academics in Wales. As a network that aims to strengthen women's rights and gender equality for all women and girls in Wales, we were delighted to see that the Sixth Senedd has a dedicated Committee working on the equality and social justice portfolio. The need for this Committee is more urgent than ever. As Dame Louise Casey put it, "what were cracks before Covid are now chasms." If we do not act now, we will undo decades of progress on gender equality and push millions more into poverty.

As the Equality and Social Justice Committee is not undertaking a public consultation on its priorities for the Sixth Senedd, we would like to take this opportunity to highlight five areas that we believe should be key priorities for the Committee to consider during the Sixth Senedd and particularly the next 12 months.

1. Legally binding diversity and gender quotas

In line with the recommendations of the Expert Panel on Electoral Reform, we believe that *now* is the time to establish diversity and gender quotas as part of increasing the size of the Senedd and establishing an STV voting system. However, we were disappointed not to see any commitments on this in the Programme for Government announced earlier this year. We believe the Equality and Social Justice Committee needs to hold the Welsh Labour Government to account to deliver on its manifesto, which promised to "*build on the work of the Senedd Committee on Electoral Reform and develop proposals to improve the representation of the people of Wales in their Parliament.*" Legally binding quotas are absolutely necessary to achieve a Senedd that reflects the population it serves and makes decisions that are thoroughly informed by the perspectives and lived experience of MSs from a diverse range of backgrounds to produce better policy outcomes for all of us.

Despite the extensive work that has already been produced around quotas, there are two aspects that urgently need further clarification to ensure Wales' quota legislation is as robust and effective as it can be. These are a) ascertaining Wales' legislative competence around introducing quota legislation together with suitable incentive/sanction mechanisms, and b) developing a model of diversity quotas that reflects international best practice and works for Wales. We believe that the Equality and Social Justice Committee can play a key role by conducting an inquiry into these issues, thereby helping Wales to be a pioneer in diversity and gender quotas just as it was with the Well-Being for Future Generations Act. We understand that the Committee responsible for electoral reform is yet to be ascertained, but believe that the issue of diversity and gender quotas sits firmly within the portfolio and expertise of the Equality and Social Justice Committee. We believe the Committee can and should play a key role in progressing this crucial aspect of the electoral reform process.

Address

WEN Wales
610 International House
10 Churchill Way
Cardiff
CF10 2HE

Contact

admin@wenwales.org.uk
wenwales.org.uk

Info

Charity Number:
1145706
Company Number:
07891533

2. A green and caring recovery from the pandemic

We believe that rebuilding the economy must be inclusive and to achieve that we need a major focus on the value of care. Across Wales and the UK, women have been more likely than men to struggle financially and experience poor mental health as a result of the pandemic. We know that financial and mental health disparities are linked to women's roles in unpaid and low paid care work. Data shows that school closures during the pandemic have hit women on low incomes particularly hard, with those on incomes less than £20,000 almost five times more likely to lose their jobs or working hours due to childcare responsibilities in comparison to women on higher incomes. While there has been much talk of a Green Recovery, we must ensure that it is a Green and Caring Recovery or we will not be living up to our values of a more equal Wales. Other countries, such as Canada, are already leading the way on this though committing to major investments into childcare as part of a plan to rebuild the economy with care, inclusivity, and women at its heart. We believe that a key priority for the Equality and Social Justice Committee should be to scrutinise the Welsh Government's recovery plan to ensure caring is at the heart of building back better.

3. Poverty

Poverty rates in Wales remain stubbornly high. Women have a higher risk of relative income poverty than men and experience and impact of poverty can be very different for women, partly as a result of their different positions in the labour market and within households. Despite these challenges there is limited discussion of tackling poverty in the Programme for Government. Many organisations, and the ELGC Committee from the previous Senedd, have called for a greater focus on tackling poverty, including a comprehensive tackling poverty strategy that takes account of the different characteristics, circumstances and barriers facing people in poverty, devolution of administrative powers over social security and work to create a coherent Welsh benefits system based on principles of equality, dignity and fairness. In the context of Covid, the removal of the £20 uplift to Universal Credit and discussions about UBI, it seems timely for the Committee to revisit the issue of poverty to ensure that every opportunity to tackle the root causes of poverty is seized this Senedd term.

4. Gender Equality Review implementation

In accepting the recommendations set out in the Gender Equality Review, and specifically the report Deeds not Words, Welsh Ministers took an important step towards implementing equalities mainstreaming. This is essential if we are to address structural inequality as if we do not change how decisions are taken we will keep developing policy that fails to account for the gendered nature of our economy and society and will therefore keep reinforcing and recreating inequality. The initial steps that Welsh Government intended to take to implement the recommendations from the Review were outlined in the Advancing Gender Equality: Action Plan. While it is understandable that the pandemic resulted in slower progress than initially intended, we do think it is timely for the ESJ Committee to carry out an inquiry to understand how implementation of this ambitious programme of change is going. To implement equalities

Address

WEN Wales
610 International House
10 Churchill Way
Cardiff
CF10 2HE

Contact

admin@wenwales.org.uk
wenwales.org.uk

Info

Charity Number:
1145706
Company Number:
07891533

mainstreaming, to ensure that policy and programme design and budgetary decisions actively contribute to the achievement of equality ambitions, would mark Wales as a leader within in the UK, and would bring us in-line with world leaders such as the Nordic nations.

5. Support for women and girls with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)

We have concerns around the safety for women with NRPF fleeing abusive relationships. The Domestic Abuse Act (2021) has fallen short in its potential to protect and support all survivors, regardless of immigration status. We strongly advocate that it is time for Wales to develop its own solution to supporting survivors with no recourse to public funds and make good on its claims of being a nation of sanctuary. This needs to include safe and secure accommodation, provision in refuge with local authorities working with specialist services to enable support for survivors with NRPF. The committee should prioritise holding Welsh Government to account on whether it is effectively utilising its policy and powers to provide clear instruction on responsibilities under the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act and consider the effectiveness of any future legislative change / updated guidance if existing legislation is not being fully utilised. We propose that the committee also call on the Minister for Social Justice to provide evidence to the committee on the above and to hear from specialist services and survivors as to whether this is the reality.

NRPF is a condition imposed on individuals under various immigration control conditions, such as EEA nationals who do not meet eligibility criteria, individuals on student and work visa, visa overstayers or illegal entrants. Women with insecure immigration status, or whose immigration status is dependent on a spouse or employer are at particular risk of violence and exploitation. They face a hostile environment of immigration checks in healthcare, maternity, education and housing settings, are prevented from accessing protection and support due to their NRPF status and they face a real risk of being detained and deported rather than assisted if they report abuse. This hostile environment is exploited by abusers to control them and scare them into not seeking help.

We would be delighted to meet you to talk about how we can support the Equality and Social Justice Committee in scrutinizing and holding the Welsh Government to account in the areas outlined above. We would be grateful if your office could contact Jessica Laimann at WEN Wales to arrange a suitable date for a meeting on jessica@wenwales.org.uk and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Jessica Laimann (on behalf of the Gender Network)
Policy and Public Affairs Officer, WEN Wales

Address

WEN Wales
610 International House
10 Churchill Way
Cardiff
CF10 2HE

Contact

admin@wenwales.org.uk
wenwales.org.uk

Info

Charity Number:
1145706
Company Number:
07891533