



## women for refugee women

### CARENZA ARNOLD

**V**IOLENCE, discrimination and abuse against women and girls is happening all over the world. Banned from school and the workplace. Forced into marriage. Trapped in abusive relationships. Forced into sexual exploitation. Raped. Treated as second-class citizens. Cut off from the public sphere.

Why? Because they are women. For many women around the world, they have no other choice other than to flee and leave everything behind, in order to save their lives and to be safe. But the in-built inhumanity of the UK's asylum process means that – right here, right now – the world's most vulnerable women are disbelieved by default, heartlessly detained at random and are often left to 'live' in atrocious accommodation.

Applications can take years in the UK as a result of a system that has been purposefully built to break people.

This isn't just wrong, it's shameful. And the UK's asylum policies are only getting more cruel, more extreme and more unsafe for women, especially those who identify as LGBTQ+. This is no longer about fair

or unfair – it's about life or death. This is where Women for Refugee Women comes in. Women for Refugee Women works alongside refugee and asylum-seeking women to counter the hostile rhetoric, campaign for change, and advocate for a fairer and more compassionate asylum system for all women. Chosen alongside the refugee women in our network, our three key campaigning priorities are: decision-making; detention and accommodation.

### Decision-making

Instead of being welcomed and supported, women are routinely disbelieved, forced to recount traumatic events – over and over again – and left in limbo for months – or even years – on end for their asylum claim to be heard. We should not shut the door on women in need.

Women seeking safety in the UK should have access to a fair and timely decision which recognises her specific experiences of persecution. WRW is campaigning to dismantle the 'culture of disbelief' that means women are often wrongly denied protection; to repeal the Illegal Migration Act 2023 so women can claim asylum in the UK; and to push for an asylum system that is gender-sensitive, and makes timely and fair decisions.

### Detention

Immigration detention is a Government practice that locks women up in prison-like conditions whilst their immigration status is resolved. Our ground-breaking research shows that the majority of women seeking asylum who are detained are survivors of rape and other forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, forced marriage, female genital cutting, and sexual exploitation. There is no time limit on immigration detention in the UK – the only European country without – meaning women are often locked up for weeks and months on end, with no idea of when they will be released. This causes extreme harm to women seeking safety in the UK. We are campaigning to shut down Derwentside (the main detention centre for women) and the small units for women at Yarl's Wood, Colnbrook and Dungavel; increase the use of community-based alternatives to detention; and end the use of immigration detention completely.

### Accommodation

Every woman should have a safe and supportive place to call home while she is waiting for her asylum claim to be heard. But current asylum accommodation falls far short. Many women we support have been accommodated in hotels for months and years on end – including mothers with their children – causing huge harm. Our ground-breaking 2024 research, Coercion and Control, revealed the dehumanising, degrading and humiliating behaviour women are subjected to in hotel accommodation. Others are forced into homelessness, sofa-surfing, or staying in insecure accommodation, placing women at further risk of harm or abuse. This must change. We are campaigning to stop the use of hotels as long-term accommodation for women; while women remain in hotels, to improve conditions; and to end the use of large scale accommodation centres.

We can't achieve any of this without the solidarity and support of people like you. If you believe the UK should Welcome Every Woman, join our community of likeminded individuals and receive infrequent updates on how you can campaign and make a real difference.

Carenza Arnold is the Communications Manager of Women for Refuge Women [www.refugeewomen.co.uk/welcome-every-woman](http://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/welcome-every-woman)



# womens justice board



VERA BAIRD

WHEN I WROTE a piece in the June edition of the Sisters journal demanding: 'Stop Imprisoning Women Survivors' I did not think that, two editions later, I would be writing that the government has set up a Women's Justice Board – yes! - to reduce the number of women in prison, including survivors of abuse.

Furthermore, I am pleased to report that I am on that Board,

I wanted to give Lord Chancellor, Shabana Mahmood, a standing ovation at our first meeting, on 25<sup>th</sup> January, when she pronounced:

"The simple truth is that we are sending too many women to prison. Many are victims themselves, and over half are mothers, leaving a child behind when they go inside.

We need to do things differently." - "It is high time we found better solutions to help vulnerable women turn their lives around."

She looked forward to the day when she could formally close some women's prisons. I don't think any of us had heard a Lord Chancellor say anything so positive and definite, before.

The Board is chaired by Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, Lord James Timpson who told us that one of his earliest memories of the prison system was waiting outside HMP Styal as a child whilst his mother took babies, she'd fostered, in to see their own mothers. As he acknowledged, children like those are still more likely to finish up in prison themselves.

I think therefore that Ministerial commitment is strong.

## The Board

There are ten Board members, as well as Lord Timpson and the MoJ Director of

Offender Policy with the full list attached here. There is an excellent array of expertise and high motivation. There is at least one expert by experience amongst us. We will serve for eighteen months, with an opportunity to renew. We will meet formally every quarter, but the work will be done outside of meetings, probably working in small groups, each to tackle a different stage of the criminal justice system, and upstream issues too.

We will be supported by a new Women in Justice Partnership Delivery Group, with external experts from the voluntary and community sector, recruited by open competition, as well as senior government representatives from other departments. This Group will be tasked with implementing the work we identify.

## Early considerations

I think we all accept that some women must go to prison. The concern is the ones who do not, and the harm that is done by ripping them away from job, home, family, friends and, above all, their children.

Taking mothers away from their children can too easily become permanent. Prison not only causes the separation but, by breaking all the woman's community ties, can make her unable to offer a stable home on her release. Even if separation does not become permanent, there is abundant research to show that it is harmful 17000 children a year are separated from their mothers by prison, a poor legacy for the next generation.

Most women receive short sentences. 53% serve less than six months in custody and a further 17% less than 12 months. Nothing is achieved, in such a short time, to help them to tackle the complex needs that characterise women offenders. I think the magistrates would say that women come back to court, again and again, having committed the same crimes. They are relatively low level, non-violent crimes, but they run through all the available community-based sentences, leaving the bench with nothing but prison left.

However, there is a tonne of technology which can be used to control the movement and behaviour of a woman, who gets a community sentence, just as effectively as imprisonment does. The bonus for her and for the economy is that 'tagging' of one sort or another, leaves social and family links in place. The intensive supervision offered by the Women's Problem-solving courts, can often reinforce a community sentence.

Clearly there is going to be an increase in probation caseloads if this pattern begins to emerge. We are exhorted to look for cost-neutral solutions and we will do, but almost everything is less costly than imprisonment

We will apply thought, as quickly as we can, to how to avoid the unnecessary imprisonment of pregnant women and those with young children

There will be much reference to the Corston review. Most of it is still as pertinent as it was on its publication in 2007. It identified that in a criminal justice context, equal outcomes for men and women require distinct and different approaches. And the optimal approaches for women, which Corston prescribed, have never been fully implemented.

Women who offend through the impact of domestic abuse and other wrongs will probably need a special group of the Board to take options on and to dovetail our proposals with the Government's strategy to halve VAWG within ten years.

We are tasked with producing a new strategy later this year, looking at options to cut reoffending like women's centres, drug rehabilitation and tagging which might better help women out of the revolving door of crime.

The other members of the Board are:

**Kate Green**, Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester for Safer and Stronger Communities.

**Dr Tom McNeil**, Chief Executive of the JABBS Foundation for Women and Girls.

**Katy Swaine Williams**, a freelance consultant with research, policy and legal expertise on women in the criminal justice system.

**Dr Shona Minson**, research associate at the University of Oxford's Centre for Criminology

**Bernie Bowen-Thomson**, Chief Executive of Safer Wales.

**Michaela Booth**, national lead for patient and family engagement at healthcare services provider Practice Plus Group.

**Anne Fox**, Chief Executive of voluntary sector group Clinks.

I don't think that anyone could suggest that this is not a powerful bunch of people, with proven track records. We are all determined to seize the day.

**Dame Vera Baird KC** is a member of the Women's Justice Board and an NAW Vice-President

[www.gov.uk/government/groups/womens-justice-board](http://www.gov.uk/government/groups/womens-justice-board)



## the widf at 80

LIZ PAYNE

2025 is a year in which special anniversaries for the women's movement will come thick and fast. For millions of women across the world, struggling to defend their hard-won rights, now sadly under attack from every quarter, these celebrations and commemorations provide the opportunity to explore our collective history, to reflect on it and find inspiration. But, more than this, they help to shine a light for new generations of working-class women and girls, on the fundamentals of the tasks ahead as we build towards a peaceful future in which justice and equality prevail, free from oppression, exploitation and violence. In this article the NAW looks back at the Women's International

## everything changes and everything stays the same

CLAIRE SULLIVAN

AS WE HAVE for more than a century, on 8 March we will mark International Women's Day – we will recognise and celebrate wherever we can, remember and mourn as we need to – and we will gather our energy

The National Assembly of Women sends greetings on International Women's Day to all those who are fighting for a better world free from wars, exploitation, oppression and inequality.



Democratic Federation (WIDF) in its 80<sup>th</sup> year and at some of the initiatives it led that also have “big 0” anniversaries in coming months.

The WIDF, to which the National Assembly of Women is affiliated, was inaugurated at a Congress in Paris in late 1945. The impetus for this development came from women’s anti-fascist, pro-equality and pro-peace internationalist movements developed during the 1930s and World War 2. These included the Union of French Women (UFF), later called Femmes Solidaires, who set up the Paris Congress. In all, 850 delegates from 181 women’s organisations from 41 countries attended. They represented millions of women from across the world. Renowned French pacifist and feminist, Gabrielle Duchene, represented the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Women delegates from Britain came from the national section of the International Women’s Day Committee (IWDC), set up in 1942 and itself part of an international network.

The founding principles of the WIDF were to fight against fascism and for peace, without which there could be no equality; for the economic, political and social rights of women everywhere and for everything necessary for the health and welfare of children, including education and the eradication of poverty. These became, and remain, the key aims of the National Assembly of Women (NAW) founded on International Women’s Day in London in 1952.

The WIDF worked closely with the World Peace Council (WPC), established in 1949 to stand against NATO, the war-mongering military alliance pursuing the collective interests of the most reactionary powers on earth. In May 1951 the WIDF made an important intervention in the Korean War. It sent an International Investigating Commission of women activists from Africa, America, Asia and Europe, including Monica Felton from Britain, to Korea to investigate the conduct of the war on the ground. The Commission’s subsequent

report, titled *We Accuse*, exposed to the world a range of American atrocities including the alleged use of germ warfare. During the Vietnam War, the WIDF and its affiliated organisations worked closely with sister organisations in Vietnam and organised protests and solidarity actions throughout. One such project with which the NAW had close involvement was the construction of the Friendship Hospital for Mothers and Babies in Hanoi which finally opened in 1979.

Eugenie Cotton, a French scientist and antifascist fighter, was the WIDF’s first president and went on to become vice-president of the WPC, a position she held until her death in 1967. Dolores Ibarruri, also known as La Pasionaria, a remarkable Republican political leader during the Civil War in Spain 1936-1939, and founder of the antifascist pro-peace women’s organisation *Mujeres Antifascistas*, was a member of the WIDF from its inception and became an honorary vice-president.

The WIDF collaborated from the outset with other mass international organisations - the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) on campaigns for the defence of children and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) on women’s rights at work.

So many ‘game-changing’ initiatives for women and children over the years have been led by the WIDF. These included the designation of 1<sup>st</sup> June as International Children’s Day, marked as such for the first time in 1950 and the organisation of the 1952 Conference in Defence of Children and the World Congress of Mothers in Lausanne in 1955. The WIDF took up the huge question of the impact of ‘empire’ on women living in colonial territories and was behind the Seminar on the Mother and Child in Africa held sixty years ago this year in August 1965 in Mali. By that time the WIDF was a huge force to be reckoned with. Its affiliate organisations included over 200 million women worldwide.

It was as a result of a proposal by WIDF women on the UN Commission

on the Status of Women fifty years ago that the United Nations declared 1975 to be the UN International Year of Women and designated the following 10 years as the UN Decade for Women to promote discussion on the advancement of women’s equality worldwide. The first UN World Conference on Women in Mexico in June 1975 was described as “the greatest consciousness-raising event in history.” Altogether four World Conferences were convened by the UN in the final quarter of the twentieth century. The 4<sup>th</sup>, in which the NAW participated, was in Beijing in September 1995. The Beijing Declaration on the attainment of equal rights for women, 30 years old this year, was the most famous output of the event.

As an affiliate of the WIDF, the NAW continues to participate in its work as a member of both its World Committee and European Regional Committee. One of the most valuable things that WIDF membership brings to the NAW is constant interaction with sister affiliated organisations which help us to gain an understanding of the experiences and struggles of women around the world, especially through meetings and statements. The NAW was one of the main organisers of an online Workshop on Women and War in July 2024, which drew a large audience and a unique set of contributions. Through the WIDF we have been able to access first-hand statements and reports of the brave contemporary struggles of women around the world, including from war zones in the Middle East and Africa. The latest statement from the Movement of Democratic Women in Israel is published in this journal.

On the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the WIDF, we have much to celebrate and much to emulate going forward. Solidarity to the WIDF and its worldwide sisterhood! The NAW is proud to be a member of this truly internationalist organisation.

**Liz Payne** is the President of the National Assembly of Women



and resolve and set our faces to the battles yet to be won.

In the same week, it will have been my honour to chair the TUC Women’s Conference and, as I approached this, I am also reflecting personally on 40 years as a woman at work, 10 years as an NHS physiotherapist and 30 as a full-time trade union official. I have been privileged to

spend my career in organisations where women comprise the majority of the workforce and yet, even here, we cannot say our work is done. 77% of NHS workers are women and yet we make up only 37% of the most senior managers.

As we approach our 115<sup>th</sup> International Women’s Day, we must never underestimate what has been achieved – legally, rights to vote, to own property, to be paid equally, for sex discrimination to be recognised, and much more. And more widely than the law, we all benefit from the ground paved by countless inspiring, resolute and courageous women.

And yet, as much as I looked forward to the conference, there is no escaping how much work there is still to do. While there might not be a retrenchment of legal rights, there most definitely is a significant regression of attitudes, behaviours and activities, with rising misogyny both in and outside the workplace. As always, women in minoritised groups suffer the most – Black women, women living and working

in poverty, disabled women and those in insecure work.

Misogyny may be just a word but the many forms it takes are actions, causing lasting harm and damage to all the women they touch. We know from a 2023 TUC report that 58% of women report being sexually harassed at work and we know that still only 3% of rapes reported lead to prosecution. We know from UN figures that 70% of those killed in Gaza in the last 15 months have been women and children.

Although it is not the only one, we know too that misogyny, in addition to being so damaging itself, is a ready and dangerous gateway to the far right and the even greater threat it poses in the UK, across Europe and globally.

So, when several hundred women trade unionists came together for the conference, we created a space that is all too rare for some - one of safety to have voice, solidarity and collectivism, where women can share past and present experiences and develop

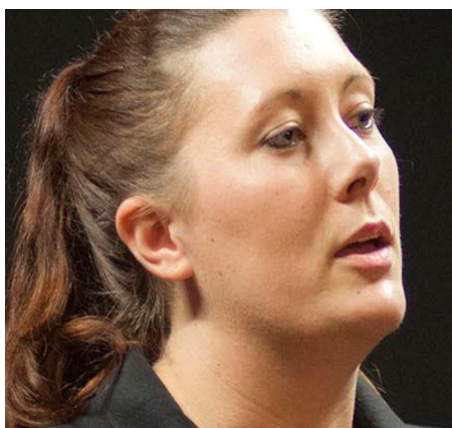
future strategies and action.

The TUC’s 48 unions debated 50 motions – many are on battlegrounds we all know – violence against women and girls, the need for greater rights, equal pay and gender pay, the menopause as a workplace issue, and appalling levels of sexual harassment. But there was also an alarming increase in motions about the rise of misogyny in all its forms, its intersectional impact and the threat posed by the far right. And we also considered new and emerging issues such as the disadvantage and discrimination experienced by women relating to the introduction of AI to the workplace.

We certainly cannot say the battle for women’s equity is won but we can say we will redouble our efforts to make sure the struggle continues.

**Claire Sullivan** is the Director of Employment Relations and Union Services, the trade union arm of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

# The challenges facing women in the trade union movement in 2025



**THE TRADE UNION** movement has long been a force for workers' rights, fighting for better wages, working conditions, and job security. However, despite significant strides, women in the trade union movement continue to face systemic barriers that hinder their full participation and leadership. In 2025, the movement must address persistent gender inequalities, discrimination, and new challenges brought about by evolving labour markets, economic shifts, and political landscapes.

## Underrepresentation in leadership

One of the most pressing challenges for women in trade unions is their underrepresentation in leadership positions. While women make up a significant portion of union membership, they remain underrepresented in decision-making roles. Many unions continue to be dominated by men at the leadership level, reinforcing structures that do not fully prioritise gender-specific workplace concerns such as equal pay, maternity rights, and workplace harassment.

The „glass ceiling“ persists in many unions, with women facing difficulties in advancing to leadership roles due to traditional gender norms, unconscious bias, and lack of mentorship opportunities. Addressing this issue requires both cultural and structural changes, the movement should be creating mentorship programmes and actively encouraging women to take on leadership roles within the movement.

## Gender pay gap and economic inequality

Despite trade unions' advocacy for fair wages, the gender pay gap remains a critical issue for women in the workforce. Women, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, continue to earn less than their male counterparts, even within unionised industries. The pay gap is further exacerbated by the undervaluation of jobs traditionally held by women, such as care work, education, and retail.

Unions must push for stronger policies to eliminate pay disparities. Without a firm commitment to closing the gender pay

gap, women will continue to experience economic inequality, undermining the very principles of labour justice.

## Workplace harassment and discrimination

Women in the trade union movement often face workplace harassment and discrimination, both in their workplaces and within the unions themselves. Sexual harassment remains a widespread problem, with many women feeling unsafe or unsupported when they report misconduct.

Unions must take a proactive stance against harassment by implementing robust reporting mechanisms, enforcing zero-tolerance policies, and providing training for reps and members on the importance of challenging sexual harassment, how to support a member who has made a disclosure and also on bystander intervention. Ensuring that unions are safe spaces for all workers, including women, is fundamental to maintaining an inclusive and effective labour movement.

## The impact of precarious work and the gig economy

The rise of precarious work and the gig economy presents unique challenges for women in the workforce. Women are disproportionately represented in part-time, temporary, and gig work, which often lacks the protections and benefits associated with traditional employment. Many women juggle multiple jobs while managing caregiving responsibilities, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and job insecurity.

Trade unions must adapt to these shifting labour dynamics by advocating for policies that extend worker protections to gig and precarious workers starting by pushing for single worker status to be at the forefront of the Employment Rights Bill. Additionally, unions should explore innovative organising strategies to reach and support women in non-traditional employment.

## Balancing work and family responsibilities

Women continue to bear a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities, whether for children, elderly parents, or other dependents. The lack of adequate parental leave policies, affordable childcare, and flexible work arrangements makes it difficult for women to fully participate in the workforce and in trade union activities.

Unions should champion family-friendly workplace policies, including paid parental leave, flexible working hours, and access to affordable childcare. Additionally, within the union movement itself, there should be greater efforts to accommodate women with caregiving responsibilities, such as scheduling meetings at family-friendly times and offering virtual participation options.

## Intersectional barriers

Women in the trade union movement do not face challenges in isolation—race, class, disability, and other intersecting identities compound their struggles. BAME women, migrant workers, LGBTQ+ individuals, and disabled women often experience multiple layers of discrimination that make it even more difficult to gain equitable treatment and leadership opportunities within unions.

To address these intersectional barriers, unions must embrace a more inclusive approach, ensuring that policies and advocacy efforts recognise and respond to the unique challenges faced by diverse groups of women. This includes amplifying the voices of marginalized women, fostering allyship, and implementing policies that promote inclusivity.

## Digital exclusion and technological disruptions

The increasing digitisation of work poses both opportunities and challenges for women in the trade union movement. While digital platforms can enhance organising efforts, they can also exclude women who lack access to technology or digital literacy skills. Moreover, automation and AI-driven job displacement disproportionately affect women in certain industries, threatening job security.

Unions must prioritise digital inclusion by providing training programmes, ensuring equitable access to technology, and advocating for policies that mitigate the gendered impact of automation. Additionally, unions should leverage digital tools to engage women workers more effectively and ensure their voices are heard in decision-making processes.

The trade union movement in 2025 stands at a crossroads. While progress has been made, significant challenges remain in ensuring that women achieve full equality within the movement. Addressing leadership disparities, closing the gender pay gap, combatting workplace harassment, supporting caregivers, and embracing intersectionality are essential steps toward a more inclusive and equitable labour movement.

Trade unions must take a proactive and intersectional approach to addressing these challenges, ensuring that all women—regardless of their background—can fully participate in and benefit from collective organising, otherwise we will see a repeat of the hundreds of thousands of women leaving the movement each year because they don't feel it is a home for them.

**Sarah Woolley** is the General Secretary of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union and an NAW Vice President

# Trump's delusions to the trash bin

## Statement from the Movement of the Democratic Women in Israel

U.S. President Trump has once again put forward imperialist schemes that are nothing more than the illusions of a megalomaniac. He plans to exploit the disaster befalling the Palestinians in Gaza—who are grappling with the horrific consequences of war, killing, displacement, and unprecedented destruction—for the benefit of his wealthy relatives and friends.

By siding with the government of bloodshed, occupation, and settlements led by Netanyahu, Trump arrogantly and crudely spoke of the “cleansing of Gaza” and proposed the mass transfer of Palestinians from their land.

The notion of “ownership of Gaza” not only contradicts international law but also reflects immoral attitudes and exacerbates the regional crisis.

The Palestinian people, rooted in their land and supported by peace advocates in Israel and around the world, as well as by numerous governments, will thwart these schemes.

We, activists of [MDWI], declare:

No to ethnic cleansing!

No to transfer!

Yes to the rehabilitation of Gaza by its residents with the assistance of supportive international powers.

Yes to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state along the June 5, 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, where citizens can live in freedom, prosperity, and dignity!

Yes to a just and sustainable peace between Israel and Palestine!

Nazareth and Tel Aviv,  
February 6, 2025

**Nisreen Morqus**

General Secretary of MDWI

**SISTERS in  
SOLIDARITY to  
END RACISM and  
SEXISM**  
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