Priorities for the Ministers for Women Session 2006/2007

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CORRECTION

Please note the following correction:

The fourth paragraph on p. 7 should be deleted.

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Presented to Parliament by the Lord Privy Seal, Leader of the House of Commons and Minister for Women by Command of Her Majesty July 2007

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PRIORITIES FOR THE MINISTERS FOR WOMEN



The Rt Hon Harriet Harman QC MP Leader of the House of Commons and Minister for Women

This paper sets out the priorities of the Ministers for Women. These are:

- 1. Supporting families, particularly as they bring up children and care for older and disabled relatives
- 2. Tackling violence against women and improving the way we deal with women who commit crimes
- 3. Empowering black and minority ethnic women to build cohesion within their communities and as a bridge between communities

Members of Parliament are asked to give us their views on whether these are the right priorities and how we should take them forward.

The public consultation will be led by the Women's National Commission which will consult with its members, feeding back views by the end of September 2007.

PRIORITY 1: SUPPORTING FAMILIES CARING FOR CHILDREN AND OLDER AND VULNERABLE RELATIVES

Families are the framework of our lives. Families matter to us as individuals – particularly when we are children but also as we get older – they matter to communities, and to the economy and society as a whole. The Government has already built a strong foundation of support for families. However, further progress is needed if all families are to be given real choices about how they live their lives.

Paid leave and flexible work

In today's families it is still women who shoulder most of the responsibility for the day to day care of children and the care and support of older and disabled relatives. However, the amount of time fathers spend with their children has increased over recent years and many fathers say they would like to be even more involved in caring for their children.

Most women also contribute to the household income by going out to work. 64% of mothers with children under 11 now work. Women's work is vital not only to their household budget, but also to our economy and public services.

The importance of helping mothers and fathers balance their paid work and their responsibilities as parents is well recognised. But women's increased participation in the workforce and their continued responsibility for caring for children comes at a time when there is a growing need to give more family care for older relatives. People are living longer – they stay in good health for longer, but the ageing population means a greater need for family support. The role of local services and the NHS is vital, such as home helps, meals on wheels, day centres and residential care. But family care is very important for many older people.

So as Ministers for Women we support our ministerial colleagues to ensure that families:

- have enough time and money to bring up their children in the way they want
- have enough time and money to care for older and disabled relatives and
- have proper support from good local services for both children and older people.

The Government has already taken action to give families more choice about balancing work and family life. This includes extending paid maternity and adoption leave from 6 to 9 months from April this year (towards the goal of a year's paid leave by the end of the Parliament), and introducing paid paternity leave for the first time.

We have also introduced the right to request flexible working: starting in 2003 with parents of children under six years old or disabled children under 18 years old, and then extended in April this year to include carers of adults. Over 6 million workers now have the right to request flexible working.

The Ministers for Women will support the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, including on:

- considering whether to extend the right to request flexible work to parents of older children
- working with employers, trade unions and others on the best way to administer giving fathers a right to take up to 26 weeks Additional Paternity Leave.

Financial and employment support

The Ministers for Women will support colleagues across Government to make further progress on improving financial and employment support for families.

Alongside the National Minimum Wage and increases in Child Benefit, the Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit have increased financial support for families to help make work pay, to support those in need and to tackle child poverty. Around 10 million children in 6 million families benefit from tax credits. The Working Tax Credit also includes help with the costs of childcare.

Tackling the pay gap between women and men will be a key priority of the Ministers for Women, working with departments in Government and in collaboration with partners outside Government. The gender pay gap has narrowed but it is still 12.6%. As the Women and Work Commission sets out this is important as a matter of principle. It also entrenches the division of labour in the home, preventing women from fulfilling their opportunities for work and preventing fathers from playing a more active role in their children's early years.

Childcare

The Ministers for Women will support ministerial colleagues in the Department for Children, Schools and Families to continue to improve the quality, availability and affordability of childcare.

Good quality, affordable childcare is good for children and helps parents balance their work and caring responsibilities.

- Since 1997, more than 1,300 Sure Start Children's Centres, providing services to over one million young children and their families and over 5,000 extended schools have been established.
- All three and four year olds are now entitled to free, part-time Government-funded, early education for 121/2 hours per week, 38 a year.
- Our goal is that by 2010, there will be a Children's Centre in every community, 3,500 in all, every school will be an extended school, offering a range of extended services between 8am and 6pm, and all three and four year olds will be able to access 15 hours of free early education per week.

Support for carers

The Ministers for Women will support colleagues in the Departments of Health; Work and Pensions; and Communities and Local Government to build on the progress the Government has made in improving support for families caring for older and disabled relatives.

Many families now have responsibility for caring for elderly or disabled relatives. The ageing population means the number of people needing and providing care will increase in future.

Many families struggle to balance their work and caring responsibilities, relatives have to cut back on work, or give up their jobs entirely, in order to care for others. Their own health can also suffer: three quarters of carers are financially worse off because of their caring responsibilities and around 40% of relatives caring for elderly or disabled suffer some form of poor health as a result of their caring responsibilities.

The Ministers for Women will support ministerial colleagues across Government, including on the wide ranging review of the 1999 National Carers Strategy recently announced by the Prime Minister. This will update the strategy up to ensure carers get the health and social care services and financial and other support they need.

The Government has:

- strengthened carers' rights, including through the Carers and Disabled Children Act, 2000 and the Carers (Equal Opportunities Act) 2004;
- introduced the Carers Grant to help councils support carers with breaks and other services. Since 1999, the grant has provided an extra £820 million for support to carers locally.
- brought forward a Pensions Bill which makes provision for contributions from caring to be recognised equally with contributions from work. The majority of those who will benefit will be women.
- announced a New Deal for Carers, which includes an extra £25m for short-term breaks for carers in crisis or emergency situations in each councils; £3m towards the establishment of a national helpline for carers; and £5m to support the development of an experts carers programme.

PRIORITY 2: TACKLING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND IMPROVING THE WAY WE DEAL WITH WOMEN WHO COMMIT CRIMES

Tackling violence against women

We have done a great deal to step up action to prevent violence against women. But crimes of domestic violence and rape remain unacceptably high.

Domestic violence accounts for 15% of all recorded violent crime and results in 2 homicides every week. Women are the victims and men are the perpetrators in 4 out of 5 domestic homicides.

Domestic violence harms women and has a devastating impact on children in the family. Crimes of domestic violence are perpetrated in families in all regions, in all social classes and across all communities. It also has costs for wider society: around £23 billion in terms of costs to public services such as the criminal justice system, housing and health and social services, and £2.7 billion cost to the economy.

At least 47,000 women report rape every year in the UK. Over the last 20 years, there has been an increase in the number of rapes reported to the police. However, many still go unreported, and less than 6% of reported rapes result in a conviction. The overall costs to society of sexual offences in 2003/04 was estimated at £8.5 billion.

Building on the action we have already taken, the Ministers for Women will support colleagues from across Government to ensure the criminal justice system and public services effectively tackle violent crimes against women.

- In November 2004, the Government introduced the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act, which was the biggest overhaul of domestic violence legislation for 30 years.
- In 2005 the government published a National Delivery Plan for Domestic Violence which sets out a strategic framework for tackling domestic violence at national regional and local levels. The updated plan published in March 2007 highlighted significant progress that the government has made.

This includes;

- 64 Specialist Domestic Violence Courts systems were operational by April 2007 and towards the aim of 100 by 2008
- 100 Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) will be established across the country by March 2008.
- an extra £3m for the funding of Independent Domestic Violence Advisors
- Every police force and CPS area now has a domestic violence co-ordinator and every police force also has a domestic violence champion and we are rolling out domestic violence training to all police and CPS prosecutors by the end of 2008.

In addition

• In April 2007, we published a Cross Government Action Plan on sexual Violence and Abuse to improve access to health and support services for victims, improve the way in which the criminal justice system responds to sexual offences and to increase opportunities to prevent these crimes.

Human trafficking takes many forms and blights the lives of men, women and children in many different continents. Britain is a major focus for the global trade of sexual exploitation of women by traffickers who trick or abduct young women and force them into prostitution: 10 years ago 85% of women in brothels were UK citizens; now 85% are from outside the UK.

Building on the action that has already been taken, the Ministers for Women will support Ministers in the Home Office to tackle this modern day slave trade. Our aims are to

- protect the victims of trafficking,
- prosecute the traffickers,
- confiscate the proceeds of the traffickers crime and
- prosecute men who rape trafficked girls.

We will work with Ministers across Government and the devolved administrations, with Ministers in Europe and UK Members of the European Parliament, and with the European Union's neighbours, to ensure the European Convention Against Human Trafficking is implemented.

We will build on the cross-government National Action Plan on Human Trafficking published in 2007. We will work to ensure we have tough laws against trafficking and that these are properly enforced, and that there is proper help and support for women who have been abducted by traffickers. We will address the 'demand' side of the trafficking market as well as undertaking measures in source countries to try and prevent trafficking by raising awareness and addressing the social and economic factors that make individuals vulnerable to exploiters.

Improving the way we deal with women who commit crimes

Baroness Corston's report, commissioned by the Home Office, on women in the criminal justice system found that

- there are many women in prison, either on remand or serving sentences for minor, non-violent offences
- many of them suffer from poor physical and mental health or substance abuse or both
- large numbers have endured violent or sexual abuse or had chaotic childhoods, and many have been in care.

The report outlines how changes in community based services for women could help improve support for women who have offended, or who are at risk of offending, and to direct young women out of pathways that lead to crime.

The Ministers for Women support working with colleagues across Government including in the Ministry of Justice to draw up the Government's response to the recommendations contained in the Corston report.

The Ministry of Justice is working with colleagues across Government, including the Ministers for Women, to draw up the Government's response to the recommendations contained in the Corston report.

PRIORITY 3: EMPOWERING WOMEN IN BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

Building community cohesion is a key Government priority. People want to live in peaceful, safe communities. Communities help shape the opportunities of individuals and their families, and underpin a strong economy and wider society.

Black and Minority Ethnic women play a crucial role within their communities and in building bridges between communities. This contribution needs to be better recognised and supported.

The Ministers for Women will therefore work to further support and empower the work of Black and Minority Ethnic women in their communities. This will include women who work to reduce crime in their local communities – for example organisations such as Mothers Against Guns – and women who work to improve services in local communities, in tenants and residents associations, and on Parent Teacher Associations and school governing bodies.

We will support ministerial colleagues in Communities and Local Government in taking this agenda forward, including

- on the 'Together We Can' programme to empower citizens to influence services and policy decisions that affect their lives
- implementing the recommendations of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, including supporting people to play a more active role in their local area and to develop relationships with people from different backgrounds, for example through shared community activities
- strengthening the role that Muslim women can play in building strong communities and in tackling violent extremism

Genuinely empowering Black and Minority Ethnic women within their communities means taking action to ensure they also have opportunities to work and to take part in wider public life.

The Government has put in place some of the most comprehensive antidiscrimination legislation in Europe.

- The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 placed a general duty on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between people of different racial groups. Around 43,000 public bodies, including government departments, local authorities and police forces are subject to this duty.
- The Gender Equality Duty came into effect on 6 April 2007 and applies a general duty to public authorities to think about policies they develop (including employment) and the services they deliver with the different needs of women and men in mind. This will mean that women and men get services that meet their needs more closely.
- We are creating the Commission for Equality and Human Rights a single equality body for race, religion and belief, gender, disability and sexual orientation – and we are currently consulting on the Discrimination Law Review.

However, as the Equalities Review and the recent Equal Opportunities Commission report "Moving on Up" outlines, Black and Minority Ethnic women often face multiple discrimination.

The Ministers for Women will therefore support Ministerial colleagues across Government to ensure Britain has modern equality legislation that it is effectively promoted and enforced.

We will support Ministers in the Departments for Work and Pensions; Innovation, Universities and Skills; Children, Schools and Families, and Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform to improve the employment opportunities of Black and Minority Ethnic women.

And we will support Ministers in Communities and Local Government to increase the number of Black and Minority Ethnic women Councillors, including with the new independent Councillors Commission – announced in the recent Local White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities".



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