

Labour will take action to end period poverty – Dawn Butler speech

Dawn Butler MP, Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, speaking at the Labour Party Women's Conference in Brighton today, said:

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Welcome to the start of Conference – yes Labour Party Conference starts today, starts now – and starts with you.

In celebration of Jeremy's new, kinder politics, I wanted you to be the first ones I share my cleanest political joke with. What have Theresa May and a circle got in common? There's just no point in them.

Good morning. My name is Dawn Butler, and I am your new Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities.

In this new role, I want to tackle all injustices – my teachers told me I wouldn't amount to anything – racism and sexism has always featured heavily in my journey. I have always worked in male-dominated industries, and it was the trade union movement that taught me that others will stand beside me in my times of despair. It taught me that united we stand, divided we fall.

Today, at our new transitional Women's Conference, be united in our fight against injustice.

All of you in this room are phenomenal women – what are you?

Our Conference today is to discuss policy, but also to empower you and for you to empower others.

We are all on a journey and, as Martin Luther King said, "I cannot be where I ought, until you are where you ought to be, that is the interrelated structure of reality."

Therefore, how you travel your journey is vital. Your dream should not be built on the pain of other women. You should not travel your journey on the backs of women, so they are looking down whilst you climb up. You should aim to travel your journey on the shoulders of women. Let other women look up to you as you progress.

If you are on the ladder of success, lay the foundations for an escalator. If you are on the escalator, lay the foundations for a lift. Ensure that the women following behind you have an easier journey, and be proud that you have helped smooth her journey. Be a friend of women.

We may have a female Prime Minister, but she is no friend of women. She says all the right things, but her deeds are destructive – 86% of her Government's cuts have fallen on women. Black and Asian women have suffered particularly

badly. And disabled women really suffered, so much so that a UN panel criticised our Government for not protecting the rights of disabled people in this country.

Since 2010, women's life expectancy has worsened. We will not live as long as other women around Europe. This Government is literally killing us.

I want us at this Conference to commit to helping women and young girls; females who can't afford to buy sanitary products. I want us at the start of Labour Conference to lead the way and say no more period poverty. Say it after me – no more period poverty.

On average, every female spends around £5000 in their lifetime on sanitary products. In the year 2000, Labour reduced the VAT on sanitary products from 17.5% to 5%. It was a good start, but we could have done better. David Cameron was pressured by the tampon tax campaign, helped by one of my team, the MP for Dewsbury. But the response has been lacking in real commitment.

Low income families shouldn't have the additional burden of struggling to afford sanitary products; or homeless women suffering on the streets; or young girls having to use socks in their pants; or missing school once a month because they just can't afford sanitary protection.

There are many solutions to this problem: free sanitary products in schools and colleges; free prescriptions for sanitary protection or reusable cups.

With all of our efforts, we could eradicate the problem in our lifetime. After all, it's not our choice whether we have periods. It's far from a luxury, so why should we suffer? If men had periods, this would have been resolved a long time ago – period.

I am proud to announce here today that you are now part of Labour's official launch on period poverty.

The next Labour Government will provide funding for free sanitary products for secondary schools, foodbanks and homeless shelters,

I will work with Monica Lennon MSP, Member of the Scottish Labour Party, who has tabled an excellent Bill on period poverty.

The Labour Party wants all women, regardless of age, social status or background, to be able to easily access the sanitary products they need.

We will pay for it by scrapping vanity projects like grammar schools and free schools.

I am a phenomenal woman.

Intersectionality, is about double, triple or quadruple discrimination. I will admit at first, I didn't like the word, mainly because I could hardly say it. But I realised during my journey I have suffered triple discrimination. I used to be discriminated against because I was black, being a woman and I was young. OK, one of those is no longer an issue, although in

Parliament with the average age still being around 75, I am still quite young

Just imagine, a working class, trade unionist, black woman, I became an MP against the odds, and I became the first black woman in the House of Commons to ever be a Minister in the UK. It was not easy, but as time goes on, I realise we are all phenomenal women, and anything is possible.