

Speech: Bright Blue's Women in Work conference speech

Today is the centenary of women's suffrage.

This is the moment when women finally gained a foothold in political life.

There are some that say: "So what?" They're the sort of people that have never felt injustice.

When our Prime Minister made her first statement in her new role, she chose to focus on "burning injustices" that still existed in our country.

She was right to do so. And she gave some examples. Here are some more.

- If you're in the UK and disabled, you're 70% more likely to be unemployed.
- According to experts, LGBT people are more likely to be at risk of being homeless or rough sleeping.
- 11% of all rough sleepers in London have been in care, and the majority have mental health needs.
- 30% of women who were in low paid jobs in 2006 were stuck in low pay a decade later.
- And people from Black African, Bangladeshi and Pakistani ethnic groups are still most likely to live in poverty and deprivation and, given the damaging effects of poverty on education, work and health, families can become locked into disadvantage for generations.

To fight injustice, we need a strong economy.

That's why I'm proud of our track record economically. It was also clear to me that if we were to deliver her agenda we needed to enable Whitehall to better focus on these complex issues. And problems that needed to be tackled by multiple departments.

For the long term – not dependent on Government, but enabled by it.

Issues, which as a nation we had not yet gripped:

- layered disadvantage;
- ignored potential.

How do we remove multiple barriers, enabling more resource than government has, and help it to be levered in?

It was clear that business as usual wasn't going to cut it.

If we're going to deliver on this agenda. We needed to start by joining things up. We need to work smarter. We needed to make sure we are applying the best ideas and solutions, whether they are from within government or

outside. We need to get moving – literally.

Last week I announced that the Prime Minister had approved some “machinery of government changes”, as Sir Humphrey would say.

Let me translate.

I want to give the Government Equalities Office not just a new home, but a permanent home, and most importantly at the centre of government.

That’s why I’m delighted that it’ll be in the Cabinet Office, from April, alongside the Race Disparity Unit. From there it will become an equalities hub, and provide some much-needed clout behind those working to ensure all our citizens have what they need to thrive.

A hub for all parts of Whitehall and beyond.

It’s no good having a central government strategy to tackle injustice if local government and communities can’t deliver it, too.

So, critically, such a hub will help us better articulate and co-ordinate a national mission to enable everyone to help fight injustice.

It will help join up our communications with key stakeholders.

One of the early things I asked for in my role as Women and Equalities Minister was a look across all the equalities asks we’re making of business.

An audit showed we’re making lots of similar requests depending on which government department is asking.

We’re asking large employers to report gender pay data.

BEIS are asking them to report CEO pay ratios, and are consulting on ethnicity pay regulations

Government wants business to sign up to a range of schemes like:

- The Race at Work Charter;
- Disability Confident;
- Sector charters for gender equality;
- and the See Potential campaign.

All of these issues are important and they all require energy and commitment in their own specific areas. But they’re not joined up or co-ordinated.

We need to think how that looks to an HR director or chief executive. How are we helping them to see the bigger picture or helping them to become an inclusive employer?

How irritating is it to have extra burdens placed on you or be lectured about workplace etiquette by a bunch of legislators whose own Houses are far from in order?

We owe it to our businesses to make sure these processes work with each other and reference each other, so that we are setting them up for success, not failure. I want to thank Greg Clark and David Lidington for supporting me in this.

I want us to get better at understanding of the asks we make on businesses and developing policy which supports them to do better on diversity and inclusion. The processes are only the means. It's the end – the creation of dynamic, diverse, high performing business and organisations – that really matters.

It will help ensure that what we are doing as a government, but also together as a nation, really is greater than the sum of the parts.

My vision for GEO is that we're the catalysts across government, amplifying and lending weight to the excellent work already underway in so many departments, and also across the country, too.

And while we're not changing any reporting lines of Minister of State and Parliamentary Under-Secretaries who are doing work focused on tackling inequality, we will support them from the GEO in getting their ambitions met.

Work by people like:

- Rory Stewart at the MOJ, trying to tackle the issues of drugs, violence and high rates of self-harm and suicide in prison;
- People Like Jackie Doyle-Price, who is doing great work on women's health inequalities;
- Or Sarah Newton who is not only working on the disability employment gap, but also on empowering the disabled consumer;
- Or Chloe Smith at Cabinet Office, who is leading work to engage young people in democracy;
- Or Kelly Tolhurst, who's putting into practice the government's commitment to flexible working;
- Or Heather Wheeler at Housing, Communities and Local Government, addressing the issues facing some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

I know they and other colleagues have huge ambitions and passion in tackling injustice and giving people what they need to build their future.

I know how hard it can be as a Junior Minister to join things up across Whitehall, and move at the pace that potential partners need us to. And the GEO can be of huge help to them in getting the things that we know need doing, done.

This machinery of government change is important, but more is needed too.

Across the public sector, we must ensure equality impact assessments are effective and remain core and integral to our policy development, with proper consideration of equalities knitted into our organisational cultures and decision-making.

And that the Equality and Human Rights Commission is as effective as it can be and delivers on the recommendations made by the Tailored Review which was published earlier this week. I know David is committed in doing that.

When I took over this brief I know questions were asked about its fit with my other, international facing, department.

Much of my focus at DFID is on the sustainable development goals and more recently on the Human Capital Index – what we're investing in our people, what we could invest and what outcomes are we getting for that investment.

I'm a Human Capital Champion for the World Bank, and that's a good fit with my domestic brief.

I'm pleased that the Index already disaggregates the data by gender – something the UK Government pushed hard for. But I would like to see it do the same, for example, by disability. The UK should be leading the way on this, building on the strong commitment to transparency which we have already demonstrated through the Race Disparity Audit and Gender Pay Gap reporting.

My work with other nations is about their journey – so that every one of their citizens can reach their full potential.

And that is the same measure we should judge ourselves on too, that no one should be left behind.

And that is at the heart of the Prime Minister's mission she articulated on the steps of Downing Street.

To deliver that, we will not just need a shift of gear, but a broadening out of what the GEO has been focused on and an increase in our ambitions in this respect.

Whitehall tends to focus on what it knows can be done. What can be easily measured. Its strategy tends to focus pretty much only on what it can effect directly and control.

When it tackles thornier and more complex issues, it's usually in the shape of discovering best practice, or chipping away at an issue.

And that is what we have tended to do at GEO.

Understandably, and rightly, it has historically had huge focus on women in work.

GEO has successfully shifted the dial on a number of issues including:

- launching a £1.5 million grant fund to encourage action in the private sector, and launching programmes in the public sector for health professionals, teachers and prospective Civil Servants, all of which are helping 'returners' across the country get back into work;
- supporting the Hampton-Alexander Review to make progress against their ambitious targets for getting more women at the top of business, seeing

the number of all-male boards in the FTSE 350 fall from 152 to 5 since 2011;

- working with BEIS on a Shared Parental Leave campaign to raise awareness and uptake of Shared Parental Leave, helping more families to share caring.

There's a lot of focus on women in boardrooms. Of course, that is emblematic of the progress women are making. But, in truth, this is not the place where business is being re-imagined. Often poor treatment and the perception of being undervalued in the workplace is the main driver for female entrepreneurs.

But if we want every woman to thrive, to be as financially secure and resilient as they can be, and to reach their full potential we need to broaden out our work beyond, the FTSE 350, beyond London, beyond executives, women on boards and big business.

We need a focus on small businesses, part time work, women from all parts of the UK, low paid women, women with multiple barriers to reaching their full potential, older women, financially fragile women, women who aren't easy to reach, or measure, or sometimes even to see.

The invisible women who keep our families our public services and our nation going.

Women to who we owe a great deal.

And women who really need our support.

And we need to focus on women at every stage of their lives.

And let me just briefly add some reassurance to the Times newspaper or anyone else who sees the fact that we want to support women who are cleaning offices, as well as the occupants of those offices, and see that as some sort of 'downgrading' of 'middle class' issues – don't panic – women's ministers can multitask.

The work done on gender pay gap reporting has been hugely helpful in focusing larger companies on the issue. It encourages them to understand the various drivers and the action that can be taken by them and others to address it.

Our work has inspired other nations to follow suit, and our metrics have now been adopted by the Bloomberg equality index.

But what does it tell us?

Let's take a look at the data.

There is a gender pay gap from the beginning of working life, indicating structural inequalities.

The gap rises steeply as women begin to have children and take time out of the labour market to care for them.

It continues to increase as women approach 50, showing the impact of many women taking several years out of work or working part-time, often to enable them to care for children.

And it is highest for those aged 50-59.

The peak age for being an unpaid carer is 55-64 years old – women often do the caring for both children and elderly relatives.

Towards the end of a woman's working life it continues to rise and then turns into a pensions pay gap. With men projected to have around a 25% higher income on average than women in their first year of retirement.

As we all live longer, this pensions gap will affect people long into their old age, leading to real inequalities in the standard of living people can afford.

It's important to me that we recognise women are individuals and we are not all identical. A range of factors affects their personal experiences, which we need to do more to understand.

The gender pay gap data and the wealth of research GEO has done over the past year have helped us understand some of the challenges women face around work:

- caring responsibilities is a huge issue;
- women are more likely to be low paid than men and far more likely to get stuck in low pay;
- just over 2 million people are inactive due to caring for home or family and nearly 90% of those people are women;
- 1 in 10 working age women belong to the 'sandwich generation' – providing care as well as having dependent children;
- this rises to 1 in 7 for women in their early 40s, those who are most likely to be in this position.

Older women of the 'sandwich generation' are more likely than men to have given up work as a result of their greater caring responsibilities. This disparity is particularly acute for older women on low incomes.

Women on legacy benefits can be trapped into limiting their hours or income by Tax Credit rules – that is why Universal Credit, which removes the cliff edge between unemployment and work, has to work.

We need to help women and men to have a better understanding of the negative impact of choices they have, may have drifted or been forced into.

The financial impact of these choices tends to be borne by women, so we need to address the reasons for that, find new solutions and create more choice so that those who want to, can share those burdens more equally. It used to be said that behind every great man, was a great woman.

These days great men are ones that get behind women.

And we need to make it easier for them to do so.

Too often work, schools, childcare and health services are designed assuming that one parent will be in work and one parent is the primary carer.

Today's families want to share caring more flexibly, and we need work and wider social support to reflect that.

This Government has a strong record on childcare and parental leave: by 2019-20 we'll be spending around £6 billion on childcare support, more than any previous government.

In 2015, we introduced Shared Parental Leave & Pay to help parents share the care in their child's first year.

This Autumn, we announced plans to require large employers to publish their policies on parental leave and pay; and to ensure ALL jobs are advertised as flexible. But just as the nature of work is changing, and families' expectations evolve, we must ensure that we continue to look at how we support parents to balance work and care more effectively.

For example, self-employed fathers are not eligible for Shared Parental Leave, and self-employed parents can find it impossible to navigate the complex system as to what they're entitled to.

The Industrial Strategy points to workplace flexibility as a driver of productivity, but many people still can't find jobs that offer them the right flexibility.

We recently published the Carers Action Plan and set up the Flexible Working Taskforce to promote best practice for flexible working.

And we also know that getting local and central government to work better together, is absolutely necessary in really making a difference.

There are some great examples – governments partnerships with local authorities in 'Integration Areas' across England, combine the weight of central government with the on-the-ground expertise only local government can provide.

But we know sometimes that is the exception rather than the rule – and if local and central government aren't pushing in the same direction this leads to confusion for people trying to access local services, or incorrect assumption being made about a person's costs of living, for example making assumptions about a person's income, but giving no weight to devolved decisions which affect it, such as council tax discounts.

So, as well as what we can learn from gender pay gap data what else do we need to think about.

How can we give better support to the 4.2 million women who are also disabled, or those from an ethnic minority?

White women have an employment rate of 73.3%, while women of Bangladeshi ethnicity have an employment rate of just 32.8%.

In the 2011 census, there were 464,000 women in the UK who could not speak English well or at all.

Or what about those with complex backgrounds often involving domestic abuse – 1.2 million female victims last year.

Women who are financially or digitally illiterate. An OECD study, found that men were over a third more likely to reach a minimum standard of financial knowledge than women. And out of the 4.3 million adults who have no basic digital skills at all, over 60% are women.

But ALL of these women want to find opportunities to realise their talent and we must help all of them.

It should be the GEO mission to ensure that every woman in the UK has as much freedom and choice and capacity and resilience, and support and protection to do whatever she wants to do.

So, you will see a broadening in our work, as well as a new address.

And today I am announcing that the next phase of our returners programme – £500,000 of funding to support people to return to work when they are ready to do so, will be focusing on those with additional barriers to participating in the labour market – including people who speak little English, people with disabilities, and those who are homeless or have been victims of domestic abuse.

I am also announcing a further £100,000 to start some more bespoke support for very marginalised women some of who have little or no work history in particular parts of the country.

There is so much more to do.

We already have some great organisations out there helping us get this right. The Women's Business Council helps us reach business leaders, and has done some brilliant work since it was established in 2012. In Parliament, the Women and Equalities Select Committee engages with a range of organisations to inform parliament and government's thinking.

And there are some great forums and campaign groups out there.

But I want to make sure we hear from women in every community, so we are undertaking a piece of work to ensure female voices are better heard by policy makers.

Every woman in the UK should feel able to raise the issues which concern them, and know that we are taking them seriously and are responding to those issues. And to find the right solutions to the complex policy challenges we face, we need to be drawing on everyone's expertise – no one has a better insight into tricky gender equality issues than the women who are dealing with them every day.

Our message to women is this: you will set our agenda.

The Prime Minister set out her mission.

But it is all of ours, too.

And in these turbulent and divided times I can think of no better mission to bring us together.

Thank you.