

UNISON National Women's conference Bournemouth 16-18 February 2023

Report by delegate, Eleanor O'Dwyer UNISON Barnardo's Women's Officer

Following a truly excellent UNISON's Women's Conference in Bournemouth 16th to 18th February I am happy to provide a report about my experience.

I was not sure what to expect but the Conference was truly a wonderful experience. Each day of the conference consisted of an excellent sub-group meeting where you got to hear about what was going on your region, or your work-stream and then we all headed into the main conference. Listening to all the inspiring women go up and share why someone's motion proposed from a completely different region of the country was important to them as well, really demonstrated how interconnected we are and how by UNISON solving a challenge in one area, it can improve the standards of people living in every area.

When people spoke on motions, you could hear the emotion, the passion and at times the anger of the impact the different workplace challenges had on their life. The evenings were a time for discussion and meeting members from other regions and getting to know the challenges that are faced around the four nations but importantly discussion around how we could affect change and make things better for everyone together. As was the slogan of the Conference – ["Together We Rise"](#).

Overview of the motions discussed:

- Increasing understanding of Domestic Abuse as a Workplace issue, with the intention of working to encourage all employers to create and implement [Domestic Abuse Policies](#), offer victims/ survivors 10 Days of paid leave in times of crisis and increase funding for Domestic Abuse support services. There was also a great discussion had on developing Domestic Abuse Champions in every UNISON branch.
- Highlighting the impact of the [Cost of Living Crisis](#) on women, with women holding 69% of low-paid and insecure jobs. There was discussion of the increased detrimental impact of rising bills on Black Women, with UNISON research showing last year that poverty levels were higher amongst Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups, young women, who are more likely to be on zero-hour contracts and disabled women, some of whom need to keep their heating and electricity due to their medical conditions - one member stating "For some now, it is not a choice between eating and heating, but upon breathing itself". To address these impacts Motions included raising minimum wage to £15 an hour; campaigning for affordable and quality child care; proactively look at the disparity of experience for Black Women Members when engaging with the Union structure to support overcoming any barriers they may face with accessing the ['There For You'](#) (UNISON Welfare) support; lobbying the Government to take real action on addressing the [Gender Pay Gap](#).

- [Promoting Positive Mental Health](#) through flexible working policies; campaigning to improve Mental Health policies at work; developing training for supporting positive mental health.
- Improving Menstrual Health through policy change and more resources to understand and support menstrual health; lobbying for free Sanitary and Incontinence Products throughout the UK (Scotland already having free sanitary products); introducing an optional medical leave policy similar to the one introduced in Spain for people who experience severe period pain; further understanding and stronger policies in every workplace around Menopause.

What was Excellent about the Conference:

- The Communities Subgroup. We were stuck in a tiny room and there was only about twenty of us, but it was just such a fantastic to hear the linked challenges that other Members working within the Community sector were experiencing and the innovative and determined ways in which they were coming up with solutions!
- I attended the Lunchtime Breakout session on “Women Becoming Active/ Having A Voice” and it was brilliant! So fantastic to hear about the Unison initiatives to train up Women members so they have the confidence to be the future leaders and create a network of support for them.
- The Morning Session on Domestic Abuse was motivational and interesting to hear about how different branches support members experiencing control and abuse. There was significant discussion on how we promote change and role model good working practice. The discussion really demonstrated the Women Members passion, with one attendee reporting she had proposed a motion on making Domestic Abuse a Workplace issue since the birth of Unison – in 1993! – and was still proposing one in 2023.
- [Christina McAnea](#) rousing speech about the history of Unison, her role as the first female General Secretary and the way Unison is supporting variety of workers who are striking currently really gave you a sense of all the work that is going on to get workers a fair deal within UNISON.
- [Bridget Phillipson MP](#), Shadow Secretary of State for Education presenting to the conference and really understanding the different challenges faced specifically by women.
- The joy and fun that different chairs brought to the role was really fantastic and made the conference less intimidating.