

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

## Report by attendee Janice Chapman Retired Members Officer

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I am pleased to report back to Branch as a visitor at the National Women's Conference, Bournemouth, 16th-18th February, during [UNISON's year of The Black Workers.](#)

The theme for this year's Conference was ['Together We Rise'](#) and it was quickly established by various speakers and delegates that we need to move forward indefinitely with this theme and not just for the conference or year ahead.

An example of being proactive was when Ellie, (Barnardo's UNISON Branch Women's Officer) and I were talking to our taxi driver on our return journey to the railway station having just left conference, he asked us what the conference was for, we said "It was a Women's Conference", he responded by asking "Is there a Men's Conference and what did you talk about?" I gave an example which was Health and Safety of women in the workplace, with specific reference to health and when he asked for examples, Ellie surprised him - mental health, menopause, menstrual health, maternity issues, motherhood, sexual harassment, bullying, impact of domestic abuse, disability, LGBTQ+, and financial hardship. The driver listened and said he had no idea that any of these were issues in the workplace. As we left him, I asked him to look out for any women and girls in his family as they could be affected in the workplace and that men need to be more aware and to respond positively, and of course, he could also join UNISON.

As well as taking part in the main business at conference, I also attended our Regional Delegate Meeting, where we discussed issues such as members being fragmented in the community workplace and having no facility time.

Mental Health support in the community is private and the NHS pay for these services - Motion 25 "Young Women's Mental health", one young delegate said she is on a waiting list for extended mental health support "I don't want the next 18 months to be my last".

Positives were highlighted by members such as one Regional Women's Officer in Wales who received an OBE recently. We discussed putting motions together at branch level, regional level, moving motions forward to National Conference, regional training will be available to build up the confidence of delegates to speak at conference.

Seminars I attended were the "Impact of living costs on women" and then "Intersectionality - what does this mean? where we discussed [Kimberley Crenshaw's](#) (Black feminist activist) concept of intersectionality "*Intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking*" and how we can change the dialogue in the workplace (in our roles as Reps) - celebrate what we do well and improve what doesn't work well. We need to think about inclusion, equality, equity, diversity, and intersectionality in the workplace. As Reps we can do this through self-reflection, conversation, listening, modelling policy, understanding outcomes and where they came from, reform policies where necessary, implement new strategies.

An example being suggested in Motion 32 - a Rep for Domestic Violence and a Domestic Violence Abuse Policy, a member spoke and said "***I am not a victim, not a survivor, I am a thriver***". Slowly and gradually we can change the culture in the workplace and women will be visible. More than 70% of UNISON members are women and women bear the brunt of the [cost-of-living crisis](#) disproportionately than men, they have to make the money stretch in the household and are often the first to go without. Women members need to gain 'empowerment together' whatever the level we work at

"SISTERS UNITED WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED" Motion 2 'Increasing participation by women in our union by lower paid women' - as I said previously training is to be available for women to gain confidence to speak up (Regional level).

There were 39 Motions to be debated, Motions 3 - 14 were debated as a group and were centred around the impact of the cost-of-living crisis for women. There were two composites Composite A - Domestic Abuse included Motions 32, 32.1, 32.2 and 33. Composite B - Defend the right to choose included Motions 34, 34.1 and 36 (Abortion).

There were highlights throughout the succession of motions, starting off with 'Women in UNISON are our strength!' Motion 9.1 highlighted the staggering fact that some childcare costs are more than the cost of the mortgage. Issues we face are also intergenerational and imposed poverty affects many as do gender issues - women on average earn 15% less than men (that figure is probably debatable too).

For my own self-interest Motion 16 highlighted the fact that one 50s born woman dies every 14 minutes without her contracted state pension at age 60 (50s women receive their SP at age 66, this has already shifted for women born in the 60s to age 67 & it will no doubt go up to 68 soon) and not in the name of equality with men as suggested by the government as a 'get out of paying us back' clause, we were not informed by DWP of the changes and no Equality Impact Assessment took place, UNISON's own Guidance on EIAs is 13 pages long Maladministration and Direct Discrimination have been evidenced from 1995 to the present day affecting 3.8million 50s women.

Motion 11.1 'Work with Black Members' was highlighted by a delegate saying "***I am a black woman, not an ethnic minority***" to great applause and understanding from members - Motion 23 Black women fall into both gender and ethnicity pay gap lower earnings figures' and are less likely to ask for help, e.g. not using food banks because of the shame this will bring on the family (further work needs to be done to support these women). Motion 7 'Surviving the cost of living crisis' - the delegate asked if we can have a "Value women pay campaign" which would give us extra money in our pockets, making both moral and economic sense, "***The cost of living is going up and the chance of life is going down***"

Motion 23.1. Our human rights are being attacked - Motion 19 "Conference notes that commitments to abortion and sexual health rights have been quietly removed by the Government from an international pack on freedom of belief and gender equality". Linking back to my opening paragraph, we need more Health and Safety reps to be women, there is no room for misogynistic men with male privilege (Motion 27,27,1) in the workplace. Women know what women need, what women want and when they need it. This Tory Government is working hard to remove 4,000 laws that support working life! However onward and upward.

Motion 22 "Menstrual Health" (Northern Ireland)- reproductive health is a workplace issue, a Brent delegate informed us that they have a Menstruation and Menopause Policy in place (great applause). Motion 21 "Equality Act and menopause", Motion 30 "Menopause and Perimenopause" all link into the fact that women need to be heard and policies to be put in place and be adhered to. Motion 20 refers to "Dual discrimination and disabled women" Disabled women are discriminated against daily in many sections of society and "government's continuing failure to implement Section 14 of the Equality Act 2010". I noted that less than 2% of women's refuge spaces in England are accessible by wheelchair. Disabled women are more likely to be harmed than others, financially, mentally, sexually and physically.

Motion 24 refers to "Promoting young women members participation in the union NLGBTQ+", I noted that the upper age of 27 was discussed and that maybe the age limit would benefit from being 30, I think there were between 4 and 7 young members at conference, Ellie was allowed into the group being age 30. In 2022 amongst other things, national LGBTQ+ launched a campaign and has since established a national young LGBTQ+ network and now has a 'buddying' scheme and is developing a mentoring programme. The national network, launched in July already had over 60 members by October, approximately 70% of whom are women.

Worthy of note is Motion 24.1 In order to engage more of our women members as activists, many being low paid, UNISON must ensure that all activists are allocated some monetary allowances and other expenses must be paid upfront fundamental to the development of women members - a thread that ran on throughout this conference.

Other highlights of the conference were the guest speakers - [Andrea Egan](#), Union President; [Christina McAnea](#), General secretary; [Bridget Phillipson MP](#), Shadow Secretary for Education and responsible for childcare policy.

My thanks go to Branch for enabling me to go to my first National Women's Conference, it has given me more awareness of the issues women face in the workplace and has also highlighted facts that we don't hear about, for example that one rep worked at and achieved a higher Band for low paid Health Assistants and their pay increased! As said **TOGETHER WE RISE** and we are not going away!

Janice Chapman

(Nominee for shared Retired Members Officer)