



How 50 years of women's liberation led to the Labour Women's Declaration **Speaker – Alice Bondi**

To explain how the Declaration itself is a natural outcome of what women have been saying and doing for the last 50 years, I'm going to outline a little of what I and others have been up to over that time and why I came to be involved with the Labour Women's Declaration working group. I'm 71 now, and back in the very early 1970s, I was involved with both the early Women's Liberation Movement and the Gay Liberation Front. This was an era when women could be refused service in a pub, when you could be sacked if it was discovered that you were gay or lesbian, when women who didn't conform to the traditional expectations of women – to wear make-up and dresses, to get married and stay at home with children – were regarded with considerable suspicion, and being openly gay or lesbian resulted in contempt and even violence.

The groups I was involved with, the work we did, contributed to changes in attitudes and changes to law and practice. The domestic abuse refuges and rape crisis centres we set up, entirely through very hard voluntary work and a lot of begging for the use of short-term properties, for minimal funding etc, were the first time that the issues of sexual and other abuse were discussed publicly and acknowledged as important. The importance of single-sex spaces for traumatised women became increasingly obvious. Police still refused to intervene when called to a house where obvious, visible, physical abuse was taking place – this was regarded as not criminal, but 'just a domestic', until the 1974-9 Labour governments introduced protections for abused women.

All women shortlists and women's officers in every CLP demonstrated Labour's commitment to promoting women's rights and countering the disadvantages faced by girls and women as a result of the socialisation we experience from birth onwards. The introduction of the 2010 Equality Act by the last Labour government was a milestone, offering protection to nine characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. It recognises that there may be conflicts between different protected characteristics,

When changes were proposed to the Gender Recognition Act of 2004 to permit self-declaration as the other 'gender', often in tandem with discussion about changes to the Equality Act, many feminists felt alarmed. It appeared that what we thought had been established and understood generally, and particularly within Labour, was now seen as irrelevant. Our concern was amplified when it was decreed, without discussion at Conference and with no consultation with women's groups, that anyone who 'identified as' a woman was eligible for both All Women Shortlists and the post of Women's Officer. No change had happened in the law, and, as we now know, no change is planned by this current government for England and Wales, though things may take a different turn in Scotland. In common with many institutions and businesses, Labour chose to run ahead of the law, assuming that self-identification with no gatekeeping of any sort was set to become the law within a short time.

There are very many ramifications to such a change which really demand full investigation and equality impact assessments for all the protected characteristics of the Equality Act, and yet without actual law change, and without consultation with all affected, changes have been happening. Those refuges, rape crisis centres, homeless women's hostels and so on, that we worked so hard for, now find that they will be refused funding unless they agree to include anyone who self-identifies as a woman. Where once women's prisons housed only women, and almost all hospital wards were sex-segregated, where it was possible for a woman to request a female clinician to undertake intimate examination and such procedures as cervical smear tests, now it is largely impossible to insist that by 'woman' one means the straightforward biological definition, as always used to be understood. It is that biology which results in the lived experience of a female body as well as the specific expectations and pressures which result in female socialisation.

This is the context into which the consultation on changes to the Gender Recognition Act appeared, and which led to women in all political parties (and none) becoming concerned about their party's policies and intentions. The SNP women were the first to create a public declaration, the women's pledges, and a group of Labour women arranged a get-together for gender-critical Labour members just before the FiLiA conference in Bradford in October 2019, where we decided that Labour needed a similar declaration to make visible the very many of us who were deeply uncomfortable with the way things were moving. We were particularly concerned because many of us had seen Labour as the party which understood the issues of women's position in society as a sex class, which had passed that legislation and created those posts. It was our Party, and several of us had only joined because we were so sure of Labour's understanding of these issues. It was a bitter disappointment to discover that Labour, in common with all the other political parties, was willing to replace understanding of the objective and material definition of sex with the non-observable inner feeling of something called 'gender identity'.

Hence, the first statement of the Declaration is that basic understanding that formed the basis of the Women's Liberation Movement and all that has developed from it over the last 50 years.

1. Women and girls are subject to discrimination and oppression on the basis of their sex.

Over the previous few years, and particularly since the intention had been announced to change the Gender Recognition Act, women had met to discuss the ramifications of the ideas of 'gender identity' and the importance and validity of women's sex-based rights. Almost without exception, these meetings had been disrupted and attendees harassed, culminating in the truly shocking events at a meeting called by Woman's Place UK during the Labour Party conference of 2019, shortly before our meeting at FiLiA. Women and men arriving at the meeting were abused in various ways and speakers had to raise their voices throughout the meeting while the protesters banged on the windows and shouted. Shockingly, this behaviour was endorsed by two speakers on the Conference floor the next day. Thus, our second and third statements are

2. Women have the right to freedom of belief, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly (Articles 18, 19 and 20 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights).

3. Women have the right to discuss policies which affect them, without being abused, harassed or intimidated.

The Equality Act was designed to protect nine characteristics, of which one is sex. As I have already outlined, the importance of single-sex provision for traumatised women is key to provision of refuges, homelessness hostels, rape crisis centres and much more, and the Equality Act permits generic and service-wide exceptions to the general assumption of non-discrimination on the basis of sex where this is a proportionate means to a legitimate aim. It is also clear that in contexts where women are vulnerable, such as those that involve the removal of clothing, an assumption of single-sex provision would be legitimate. Hence our fourth Declaration point:

4. Women have the right to maintain their sex-based protections, as set out in the Equality Act 2010. These include female-only spaces such as changing rooms, hospital wards, sanitary and sleeping accommodation, refuges, hostels and prisons.

There has been considerable concern about participation in sport. Transgender people understandably wish to continue to participate in sport after transition, but there is a mass of evidence to establish that anyone who is born male, and most particularly anyone who has gone through a male puberty, is provided with a major advantage in many aspects of sport. Lungs have greater capacity, limbs are proportionally longer, muscle mass is much greater, and so on. Hence to permit those who self-id as female to compete against women guarantees that the women against whom they compete will be at a disadvantage. In contact sports, such as boxing or rugby, there are serious physical dangers to women competing against those who have grown up as men. You may have seen recently that World Rugby considered all the detailed scientific evidence and decided that only women should play elite women's rugby, although it seems the UK bodies will not follow suit despite the considerable evidence. Additionally, in team sports and in selection for competition, the inclusion of transwomen will mean that a girl or woman will not get the place for which they have trained. Thus, our fifth point states

5. Women have the right to participate in single-sex sports, to ensure fairness and safety at all levels of competition.

Just as groups of disabled people, people of colour and others, including trans groups, have a right to undertake activities together because of their shared experiences, so we believe should women. Hence our point six:

6. Women have the right to organise themselves, as a sex, across a range of cultural, leisure, educational and political activities.

Our shock and distress at what has happened at branch, CLP and national level when women have tried to self-organise impelled us to be quite specific about the need for the Labour Party and the trades union movement to step up.

7. We condemn all attempts to undermine or limit the rights of women to self-organise and call on the Labour Party and the trades union movement to actively support these essential freedoms.

When we assert these seven statements, we are frequently accused of something termed 'transphobia' and of being 'trans-exclusionary radical feminists' – which gives rise to the abusive term 'terf'. It needs to be absolutely clear that we do not hate or fear transgender people, nor do we wish to exclude them from society. We wish, in the materialist tradition of the Labour Party, to recognise the reasons behind the various laws and customs that have ensured the dignity and safety of women and girls. Women are a sex class. We can no more 'identify' out of the facts of female existence than we can identify out of the oppression manifested in a class-based society.

We entirely agree that trans people should be free from harassment and discrimination, and the Equality Act 2010 explicitly covers conduct that is related to a protected characteristic and violates dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile or humiliating situation.

The changes to the definition and understanding of the word 'woman' in the Labour Party took place without consultation with women and with no assessment of the impact on us or the Party as a whole. It is both natural justice and stated Labour policy that women should be considered and consulted in all aspects of policy.

Our primary purpose is to hold the Labour Party to its previously clear commitment to countering the disadvantage, discrimination and oppression faced by women, which in part involves – as stated clearly in the 2019 manifesto – ensuring “that the single-sex-based exemptions contained in the Equality Act 2010 are understood and fully enforced in service provision”. However, although our focus is the Labour Party, all that we are doing relates to the work of many women's groups, within political parties and in many other contexts. These issues pervade society, and are in no way specific to Labour. We hope that you will support our aims in whatever way you are able to do.