



**National  
Council of  
Women GB**  
For a fair and  
inclusive society

# February 2024 Member Newsletter

**Welcome to the newsletter of the National Council of Women GB. This month we bring you news of two debates being held, NCW's contribution to the International Women's Week celebrations; news from Parliament; women's health priorities 2024; violence against women and girls plus other interesting articles on various subjects**

## President's Message

Dear NCW Members

The past month has been full of activity! We were delighted to launch our new series of **Online Debates** with a very topical discussion about *'Women in public work and their safety'*. Do look at the brief report of the debate in this newsletter.

We have two more debates planned:

- Changing the climate for climate change on Tuesday 19 March at 13.00 hours.
- NCW Network 18-30: Campaign on non-fatal strangulation and suffocation on Thursday 21 March at 19.00 hours

We'll look forward to welcoming you at these fascinating debates. Full details and how to sign up through Eventbrite are in this newsletter.

These debates are part of our activity centred around **International Women's Day (IWD)**. In addition, Ruth Batty and I will be attending various events about IWD to represent NCWGB and to spread the word about our work.

NCW will be well represented at the forthcoming **Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)** in March at the UN Headquarters. Management Committee member, Bushra Ahmed and Network 18-30 member, Abby Hunt will be at the CSW meeting in person and many NCW members will be joining the Zoom debates. Watch out for reports of our activity in future newsletters.

Do take a look at the interesting report by Gail Bishop on what's been happening in Parliament: the topics affect us all.

Plans for our Spring conference *'Achieving Inclusion'* on **Friday 26 April** are developing well and we'll be sending you full information very shortly. Our website is regularly updated so do keep an eye on it for the latest news from NCW!

With very best wishes

**Jilly Rogers**  
National President



## Developing the way NCW works

We're developing a number of steering groups to drive forward our work. All members will shortly be asked if they'd be interested in joining any of the steering groups. It would be great to have your input, so please do consider it. The current steering groups are:

Media and the Arts	International Affairs
Current Affairs	Young Women
Associates	

## IN MEMORY

It is with much sadness that we have heard recently of the death of past president Patience Purdy. She served as president of NCW from 1992 - 1994. Patience was a long serving member of NCW and active campaigner on many things. She wrote a book in 2022 titled: "Engineers and Women Changed the World: A Memoir" which tells the story of her ninety years of life, chronicling the changes that have taken place throughout society across that time, both technological and otherwise.

Our thoughts are with her family.

## Women's Safety in Public Life: Online Discussion

### Jackie Taylor and Lucy Caldicott



We launched our series of NCW Online Debates with a fascinating discussion of women's safety in public life. This is a hugely topical issue explored by our two speakers **Jackie Taylor**, NCW member, nurse and social worker, and member of Sandwell Council and **Lucy Caldicott**, charity leader, previously a borough councilor and Director of Policy for a Mayoral campaign.

They tackled issues such as how do we deal with this anti-women invective, often particularly aimed at women of colour. What safety measures can we put in place - or should be in place, bearing in mind that women would want to be visible and accessible in order to build public trust? How do we work towards an exchange of views, especially regarding politics, in a moral and civil way?

Jackie shared the measures she has in place to safeguard herself: conducting surgeries in public, always having another person present, getting people to check on her whereabouts, having a code on her phone to use if she was unsafe.

Lucy highlighted the challenges faced by young women working in the charity sector, in shops, in campaigning roles. There is a conflict between needing to be visible in a public facing role and to engage with the public while keeping safe personally.

The debate was lively and participants raised their personal concerns and ways of trying to ensure their safety.

This is surely a topic that we will return to given its importance to all of us.

### United Nations Commission on the Status of Women CSW68 March 2024

#### NCW attendance

NCWGB will be represented at the 2024 meeting of the CSW by two members:

- Bushra Ahmed, Management Committee member and trustee
- Abby Hunt, 18-30 Network member

We're delighted that your issues and concerns will be represented at this important meeting. All those attending to represent us will have support and training. We wish them every success and hope they enjoy the meeting.

Other members can also register for the NGO CSW68 Forum which runs parallel to the UN CSW. Click on the link [NGO CSW68 Forum \(vfairs.com\)](https://vfairs.com) to register and get access to the virtual portal.

### Business and Professional Women UK

(member of Six O group)

National Conference

#### Women Flying High

Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> March  
The Village Hotel, Filton, Bristol  
From 9am to approx. 5pm

Further information from [Events – Business & Professional Women UK \(bpwuk.org.uk\)](https://events-business-professional-women-uk.org.uk)

### Members news

Please give a warm welcome to our newest member:

- Delphine Gratrix, Friend

We look forward to seeing you at future NCW meetings and events.

**We are delighted to announce two NCW monthly debates, our contribution to the International Women's Week celebrations; We aim to "Inspire Inclusion" of our members and supporters in addressing two topics close to our hearts.**

## Changing the climate for climate change

The UN says that 'with a climate cataclysm looming ... current plans are wholly insufficient.' At our current global pace of carbon emissions, the world will burn through its remaining "carbon budget" by 2030. All countries both cause and suffer from the problem so need to act in concert.



At our 2023 AGM, NCW members called on the international community to co-operate to radically strengthen climate action plans. Most people are worried about climate change, but they feel frustrated and pessimistic about it. Forty-five percent of young people globally, say their feelings about climate change negatively affect their daily life and functioning: And the feeling that governments are not doing enough is linked to climate anxiety.

But there is plenty that can be done. Join us in a discussion about UK plans, how the government can improve wellbeing through nature and create green jobs, what other countries are doing and how NCW can put pressure internationally.

We are currently inviting guest speakers to talk to us prior to the group discussion, so please watch out for updates. To book your free place, please follow the link below:

**Date: Tuesday 19 March 2024 Time: 1pm to 2.30pm**

**Booking link:** <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/changing-the-climate-for-climate-change-tickets-845818123777>

## NCW Network 18-30: Campaign on non-fatal strangulation and suffocation

Network 18-30 member, Maisie, feels deep concern about the level of sexual violence and harassment faced by women students at UK universities. Disturbing ONS Crime statistics for England and Wales show that sexual assault is higher among full-time students than any other occupation, and women of all ages are significantly more likely to be victims of sexual assault than men. Maisie is particularly disturbed by the rising incidence of non-fatal strangulation and suffocation, which has been linked to children's increased exposure to porn. Yet there is a distinct lack of authoritative and quantitative data, meaning that the problem cannot be addressed.



### A bit about Maisie....

I joined NCW as I have always been passionate about women's rights and, for me, NCW provided an authoritative, influential space in which to pursue this. The resources, experience, and knowledge which is available with the organisation is what makes it so valuable to me.

This particular topic is of special importance to me due to personal and peer experience at university. So often hidden from the public gaze, I want this to become more widely recognised and protected against in order to safeguard women from future harm.

Join today's discussion to add your experiences, share your views, and support NCW's Network 18-30 campaign plans for inclusion of uninformed non-fatal strangulation and suffocation in relevant research and appropriate policy making.

**Date: Thursday 21 March 2024 Time: 7pm**

**Booking Link:** <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/ncw-network-18-30-campaign-on-non-fatal-strangulation-and-suffocation-tickets-838788367587>

For further information please contact our national office via [info@ncwgb.org](mailto:info@ncwgb.org) or 01325 367375

## Parliamentary Report Highlights (not covered elsewhere in the Newsletter)

- **Non-contact sexual offences.** A [new Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry](#) to explore the escalation of non-contact sexual offences such as voyeurism and indecent exposure into more serious sexual offences such as rape and sexual assault, and whether enough is being done to prevent the escalation.

## In the news By Gail Bishop

### Women's Health

#### Devastating impact of UK aid cuts on women's health

The International Development Select Committee has warned that the UK's aid cuts have had a [devastating impact on women's health across the globe](#) and will lead to thousands of deaths. Following the Government's decision to reduce foreign aid spending in 2020, budgets for international sexual and reproductive health projects supported by the UK have been reduced or cancelled with little to no notice.

The report found Foreign Office spending has halved on family planning and dropped by 37 per cent on reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health since 2019. Multiple UK overseas aid projects, such as HIV clinics in Kenya, have been scaled back or disbanded. A girl in South Sudan is more likely to die in childbirth than to finish secondary school. Access to contraceptives is expected to be limited for millions of women in countries including Afghanistan, Malawi, Nigeria, and Pakistan. The report said nearly 300,000 women died as a result of pregnancy and childbirth globally in 2020, with the vast majority in poorer countries, including 70 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa alone. 2.4 million babies died in their first month of life mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and central and southern Asia. The report contains 5 recommendations for the Government.

#### Victims of vaginal mesh and valproate deserve urgent compensation

Dr Henrietta Hughes, the Patients' Safety Commissioner, [has called for urgent interim payouts](#) to women who were injured by vaginal mesh and to families whose babies were born disabled as a result of taking sodium valproate (a safe epilepsy drug)

during pregnancy. Scientific papers from as early as the 1980s suggested valproate medicines were dangerous to developing babies, yet warnings about the potential effects were not added to some packaging until 2016. Dr Hughes has recommended initial payments of £100,000 for victims of sodium valproate and £20,000 for women injured by mesh implants. Her report makes 10 recommendations in all on how to provide redress to those harmed. The [case for redress](#) – the 'why' – was made by Baroness Cumberlege in her report in 2020.

#### Certificates to recognise the loss of a baby

Bereaved parents who lose a baby before 24 weeks of pregnancy in England can now receive [a certificate in recognition of their loss](#). Ministers say they have listened to bereaved parents who have gone through the painful experience of miscarriage. Campaigners said they were delighted that millions of families would finally get the formal acknowledgement that their baby existed. All parents who have experienced baby loss since September 2018 can apply. This was announced as part of the Women's Health Strategy in 2022.

#### Menopause in the workplace

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission has [issued guidance](#) to employers saying they have a responsibility to make reasonable adjustments to protect staff going through the menopause. Two-thirds of women with symptoms say it has a negative impact on work life and 1 in 10 women surveyed has left their role due to symptoms. The EHRC says if symptoms have a substantial long-term impact on a woman's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities, it may be considered a disability under the Equality Act 2010. Women could be helped by flexible working and being allowed to work from home, relaxing uniform policies and allowing menopausal women to wear cooler clothes and providing quiet rooms, cooling systems or fans for women experiencing hot flushes.

### Green light on folic acid

Following the publication of the responses to its consultation, the Government has decided to proceed with the mandatory addition of 250 µg of folic acid per 100g of non-whole wheat flour with a two-year transition period. On the one hand, this is good news as NCWGB first called on the Government in 1998 to fortify flour with folic acid so that all women could consume enough extra folic acid daily to prevent *spina*

*bifida* and other neural tube defects in babies. The Resolution was reaffirmed in 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2016. On the other hand, NCWGB recently wrote to Government Ministers urging them to increase the amount of folic acid and add it to all flours and rice in line with compelling scientific and medical research. It's disappointing the advice of experts and campaigners hasn't been followed.

## Women's health priorities for 2024

Speaking at a Women's Health Summit in central London to mark the second year of the Women's Health Strategy, the Health and Social Care Secretary announced the Government's priorities for women's health in 2024. These include:

- Better care for menstrual and gynaecological problems including endometriosis and painful heavy periods by producing guidance for healthcare professionals, continuing to improve information and support for women and promoting easier access to contraception, which can help with these conditions. The Office for National Statistics will investigate the impact of period problems and endometriosis on women's participation in, and progress at, work;
- Expanding the women's 'one stop' health hubs programme with the aim of having at least one in every local area;
- Bolstering maternity care both during and after pregnancy, including a greater focus on preconception and postnatal care, supporting women who suffer with birth trauma and providing better awareness of morning sickness;
- Tackling disparities and improving support for vulnerable women including victims of sexual abuse and violence by ensuring training and support systems are working effectively and focusing on improving the health of women in prisons.
- Improving fairness and tackling inequalities and disparities in the provision of care
- More research into the health needs of women through a National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), backed by £50 million.

The Government also announced the reappointment of Professor Dame Lesley Regan as Women's Health Ambassador for England for a further two years, to December 2025.

## Violence against women and girls

### FGM

Amina Noor has been jailed for 7 years for taking a three-year-old British child to Kenya for female genital mutilation (FGM). This is the first conviction in the UK for female genital mutilation occurring abroad and only the second time that somebody has been convicted of FGM since it became illegal in 1985.

### Harsher sentences for 'rough sex killers'

A new statutory aggravating factor will be brought in for offenders who cause death through abusive, degrading or dangerous sexual behaviour meaning perpetrators will receive longer sentences. This builds upon action taken in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 to clarify in law that there is no such thing as the 'rough sex defence'. The government has appointed leading academic Professor Katrin Hohl as the new Independent Advisor to the Rape Review. Professor Hohl led the ground-breaking and successful scheme to overhaul the way in which the police investigate rape – Operation Soteria.



## Council cuts to violence against women services

Domestic abuse charities and centres dealing with sexual violence say council budget cuts will have a devastating impact on support for women, warning that entire services may have to close. Women's Aid, a federation of about 180 domestic abuse services, said violence against women services are at greatest risk. Most aspects of the services were non-statutory, meaning councils do not have a legal obligation to keep funding them and are likely to cut them as they try to balance their budgets. For those that are statutory, such as refuges and accommodation for victims of abuse, funding risks being diverted elsewhere.

## Key statistic hides extent of violence against women and girls

A key crime measure routinely quoted by ministers excludes many crimes that affect women more often than men. The headline figure from the Office for National Statistics shows "total" crime has halved since 2010 but it excludes sexual assault, even rape. The ONS says it is more challenging to collect accurate data on these kinds of crimes.

## Equal rights

### Government's Disability Action Plan

The Government has published its long-awaited disability action plan for 2023-2024, which aims to improve the life of disabled people. The main measures among the 32 changes proposed are a new working group to help businesses understand the needs of disabled people and a fund to support disabled people who want to be elected councillors or MPs. Disabled people will be included in resilience planning and climate related policies. Playgrounds will be made more accessible. Campaigners say the plan lacks ambition and the measures are a wholly inadequate response to the inequalities faced by disabled people. Only 1,300 people responded to the Government's consultation.

### Labour's pledges equal pay rights for ethnic minorities

As part of its policy priorities if it wins the next election, Labour has pledged to extend all equal pay rights to ethnic minority workers and disabled people, giving those groups the same stronger protections already available to women. Labour will additionally enact protections against dual discrimination. People who face prejudice because of a combination of protected characteristics will only have to bring one claim. A Windrush commissioner will be appointed to monitor the compensation scheme, which has been criticised over its slow implementation. The measures will be included in the draft Race Equality Act announced by Labour in 2020. This will impose a duty on public services, including the NHS, police, schools, and councils, to collect and report data on staffing, pay, and outcomes by ethnicity. Also included are plans for tackling health disparities. There will be a new target to close the maternal health gaps experienced by black and Asian women, greater access to mental health support and updated clinical training to better serve the diverse patient population.

## Cash incentive for nursery workers

Childcare workers will be offered a £1,000 cash payment as part of the Government's £6.5 million recruitment drive to encourage 3,000 people to apply for, or return to, jobs in the early years sector. The trial will be rolled out in 20 local authorities. It is a direct response to the difficulties of recruiting and retaining staff ahead of the Government's **April expansion of funded childcare hours, with over** 100,000 parents already signed up. The Government's recruitment campaign comes against the backdrop of a dwindling number of childcare providers due to workers leaving the profession. It is estimated that 27,500 extra early-years professionals are needed.

## Online safety

Coroners will be allowed to demand access to technology companies' data when looking at cases involving the death of a child. Campaigners secured this right during the passage of the Online Safety Bill, but it emerged that the Government had restricted the provision. The restriction has been removed and the legislation will now apply to all inquests involving children.

## Ban on disposable vapes

The Government has announced a ban on disposable vapes and powers to restrict flavours and introduce plain packaging as part of its strategy to tackle youth vaping and create a smoke free generation. The ban will protect children's health and the environment. The announcement came ahead of the publication of the Government's response to its public consultation, in which a large majority supported its strategy.

## Darlington Branch news

By Gail Bishop

### Period dignity

The speaker at Darlington Branch's January meeting was Vik Brown, Lifestyle Clinic Coordinator at Teesside University. Her talk was on period dignity, as she prefers to call it. Vik has led a [hugely successful campaign](#) against considerable odds to destigmatise periods and make period products freely available at the university. Her campaign was motivated by gender inequality and her personal experience as a girl growing up in poverty with cheap products. She would constantly worry about bleed through, get anxious and sweat profusely in panic. She became dangerously dehydrated and as a result would suffer with cystitis each month.

In Middlesbrough, 4 out of 10 children live below the poverty line. 1 in 9 girls in the UK are missing part of their education because they can't afford period products. It's one of the highest reasons for girls' absences, including from exams, and being kicked off courses. Cheap, bleached, chlorine impregnated, poor quality period products aren't effective and can cause infections, leading to anxiety of bleed through, missing sport, sickness absence and repeated infection that can cause problems in later life. A survey at Teesside University revealed the extent of the period anxiety of female students but it was still a battle to convince management to take it seriously. Eventually, Vik secured £1,000 in funding and began putting free products into toilets. Initially, some students were hostile, regarding it as shameful, and there was some vandalism. But attitudes gradually changed. Vik started discussion sessions, educating students on how to use the products safely and overcoming any cultural reticence among students from overseas. Issues such as natural changes in the body and period related conditions such as period pain and endometriosis were explained. Information was provided about the different products available, such as reusable period pants and menstrual cups, but pads remain the most popular. A key consideration for Vik was sustainability. She only supplies products that are 100% organic. Products made from tree sap and bamboo are now coming onto the market. But quality products aren't cheap.

Suddenly the improvement in academic performance at the university caught management's attention and Vik gradually gained male allies, possibly encouraged by their partners and daughters. In 3 years, her funding increased to £5K then £19k and periods and period products have become a normal part of university life, even cited as a factor in attracting young people to the university because they feel it cares. Partnering with the planet-friendly company TOTEM (short for Time of the Month) has helped. The University was persuaded to give Vik an annual budget so that she could bulk buy and take advantage of special offers. Vik now supplies free products in all the toilets across the University's 3 campuses and the improvement in academic performance of women students is clear to see.

### Assisted dying

Darlington Branch's January discussion group was on assisted dying, introduced by member, Kate Wallace. She opened the discussion by recalling Diana Rigg's [impassioned plea](#) to legalise assisted dying in a message recorded shortly before her "truly awful" death from cancer in 2020. It vividly described the last "dehumanising" dreadful weeks of her illness. Broadcaster Jonathan Dimbleby and his brother Nicholas, who was diagnosed with motor neurone disease in 2023, openly discussed their views on the right to die on BBC Radio 4. For Nicholas, every day was a terrible endurance test. The details were hard to hear.

*Continued overleaf*

## Assisted dying *continued*

Kate explained that in England, Wales and Northern Ireland assisted dying or assisting a suicide is a crime liable to up to 14 years in prison. There is no specific crime of assisting a suicide in Scotland but helping a person to die could lead to prosecution for culpable homicide. Kate gave examples of countries where assisted dying is legal, such as 10 states in the USA, Western Australia, New Zealand and Canada, where the gradual relaxation of the law has proved controversial. In 2021, the law in Canada was changed to include those with serious and chronic physical conditions, even if the condition was non-life threatening. The law was due to change again to allow people with “grievous and irremediable” mental illness but no physical illness to seek death. This proved to be so contentious that it was shelved just weeks before it was due to take effect.

The views of Darlington members were wide ranging from those who thought we should all have the right to choose, to those who were undecided, to those who were firmly against. Some members told of their personal experiences of seriously ill close relatives and how this had influenced their views, which fell on both sides of the argument. One member has a Canadian friend whose wife chose an assisted death.

Some broad themes emerged from the discussion. Concerns were expressed about how it was impossible to ensure that decisions were truly voluntary and that there was no medical or family coercion. Members with family experience of palliative care were full of praise for it and felt it was a better option than legalising assisted dying. Some members were concerned about who would administer the drug. It would be unfair on healthcare professionals, whose role was to support patients to live, not to deliberately bring about their deaths. On the other side of the argument, it was pointed out that good quality palliative care was not universally available for free and, even with palliative care, some people still experienced unbearable physical pain or emotional distress that could not be relieved. An example was given of an MP who had voted against assisted dying in Parliament but whose view was changed by personal experience of a painful terminal illness. It was noted that in jurisdictions where assisted dying was lawful, there were eligibility criteria, safeguards and regulation in place to protect patients. Some members were concerned that the option of going to Dignitas was only available to those who had money. Those without the means and no alternative here might end their own lives, as many do. Diana Rigg had refused all liquid and food to hasten her death, which had been extremely painful and difficult for her family.

According to the campaign organisation Dignity in Dying, 84% of the public now support the choice of assisted dying / assisted suicide for terminally ill adults. The BMA has switched from opposition to a position of neutrality. The parliamentary Health and Social Care Committee is currently holding an inquiry into it. It may not be long before the issue is once again being debated and voted on in Parliament.