

Annual report – Women Members' Standing Committee 2022-23

At the annual women members' conference held on 8 December 2022, the following members were elected to the Women Members' Standing Committee for two years: Vicky Blake (University of Leeds), Maria Chondrogianni (University of Westminster), Jennifer Dods (Leeds Beckett University, Gillian Jack (The Open University) and Victoria Showunmi (University College London).

The areas of the committee's work over the last year include:

Abortion rights

UCU affiliates to Abortion Rights, the national pro-choice campaign. We have also continued to support the 'Back off' campaign by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (a charity which provides abortion care, primarily on behalf of the NHS) which seeks to establish protest free zones outside centres so that women can access services without being subjected to harassment and intimidation.

UCU was shocked and alarmed by the decision in June to sentence a mother-of-three to 28 months in prison for using abortion pills to end her own pregnancy.

This case (which was since overturned) highlighted the pressing need for comprehensive abortion law reform. It is our view that abortion is a normal part of healthcare and that everyone should have access to healthcare. Pills by post was a significant measure that reduced countless socio-economic barriers to abortion care during the pandemic. It has rightly been maintained because it reduced waiting times and has been rated well by patients.

BPAS (British Pregnancy Advisory Service), the Fawcett Society and others organised a protest rally at the Royal Courts of Justice on 17 June which we encouraged members to attend. We also urged members to tell their MP to back abortion law reform: [Time To Act - BPAS Campaigns \(bpas-campaigns.org\)](https://bpas-campaigns.org)

March for Choice

Abortion Rights UK held its annual Stand Up for Choice counter-protest against this year's anti-abortion rally in London on 2 September which we encouraged members to attend.

Motions from women members' standing committee to national Congress and Sector Conferences 2023

The women members' standing committee submitted the following motions to UCU Congress and sector conferences in 2022:

FE sector conference

Maternity/paternity rights in the FE sector

HE sector conference

Supporting parents and challenging inequality in HE

Equalities, the cost of living and HE industrial work

Congress

Informed decision making and safety in sex work

Health crisis and Covid impact on women

Parents at work

Maternity Action

UCU is an affiliate of Maternity Action, the UK's maternity rights charity dedicated to promoting, protecting and enhancing the rights of all pregnant women, new mothers and their families to employment, social security and health care. We have collaborated with them on a number of projects over the years.

[Alliance for maternity rights](#)

[Maternity Action chairs the Alliance for maternity rights which UCU is also a member of. One of the items we have discussed is the](#) Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy & Family Leave) Bill, [a private members Bill. You can see a briefing here: Dan-Jarvis-PMB-HoL-2R-briefing-Feb-2023.pdf \(maternityaction.org.uk\)](#)

The failure of *maternity* pay to keep up with the dramatic increase in the *cost of living* is driving more and more pregnant women and new mothers into poverty.

The alliance discussed the Maternity Action project to understand more about how living on a low income and the current cost of living crisis is affecting pregnant women and new mothers. A series of events were held in each nation over the summer.

Shared parental leave reform

In June 2023, the Department for Business and Trade released its long awaited evaluation of Shared Parental Leave which we, as part of the Alliance for Maternity Rights and the charity Working Families, have been pushing for over the past few years.

The Shared Parental Leave scheme, which came into effect in 2015, was intended to give parents more choice and flexibility in how they shared care, encourage more fathers to play a greater caring role and increase flexibility for both employers and employees. Beyond these narrow policy objectives, Ministers claimed that the scheme would prompt cultural shifts towards more equal parenting and provide a means of reducing maternity discrimination. A key question for the evaluation of Shared Parental Leave was the take-up rate for fathers.

The take-up rate for Shared Parental Leave has been shrouded in mystery since its inception, with various Parliamentary Questions failing to provide the clarity sought. Analysis of publicly available information suggested that take-up rates were very low. Here is a briefing from Maternity Action:

[ShPIEvalParentalSurveyBriefing-July2022-FINAL.pdf \(maternityaction.org.uk\)](#)

[We will continue to work with Maternity Action and others to push for reform.](#)

Sexual harassment

Worker Protection Bill – sexual harassment

We are delighted that The Worker Protection Bill passed its final stage in the House of Commons on 20 October 2023 which means it will become law before the end of the year.

This law will create a 'preventative duty': a requirement that employers prevent sexual harassment from happening in their workplaces and moves us from a culture of redress to one of prevention. This means clear policies, training, and proper, impartial investigations into reported harassment. The Equalities and Human Rights Commission will be able to take enforcement action against firms

that breach this duty, and employers will also be liable to individuals as part of wider sexual harassment claims at an employment tribunal. The Bill is not everything that we want and there is still significant work to do to make what has been introduced effective, as well as continued campaigning to strengthen the law further to ensure everyone is protected and has access to justice. However, this is an important step forward.

The Fawcett Society led the campaign to make this happen, along with Wera Hobhouse MP and the This Is Not Working Alliance. **UCU has been a member of the TUC led This is Not Working Alliance since its inception in 2019 and are also a long standing affiliate of the Fawcett Society** (the UK's leading membership charity campaigning for gender equality and women's rights at work).

Railway ticket office closures – safety of women and girls

There has been widespread opposition to the train companies' plans to close almost every railway ticket office in England which unions estimate will also lead to an almost 25% reduction in railway station staff. One of the key concerns raised is that the closures could lead to a worsening in terms of safety of women and girls when travelling by rail. The RMT trade union has been coordinating a submission to the public consultation signed by women's organisations and UCU added its name to a statement on this.

Training

We have continued to run the Challenging sexual harassment national training courses for reps (these are one day events) and the CPD webinars (these are 1 ½ hours) which are an introduction to the topic.

Challenging misogyny and sexism

A new CPD webinar is in the planning on challenging misogyny and sexism, both within workplaces and branches. We are looking for examples of collective work done/approaches used in branches.

Supporting safer sex work – a UCU briefing

We produced a briefing designed to provide more information to enable those who are working in, or considering entering, the sex industry to make informed and empowered decisions. It builds on established UCU policy to work towards decriminalising sex work:

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/13822/Supporting-safer-sex-work---UCU-briefing/pdf/UCU_supporting_safe_sex_work.pdf

TUC Women's Conference

UCU sent a delegation to TUC Women's Conference in London from 8-10 March which was the first time the conference had been held in person since 2020.

The theme of this year's conference was "Women demand better". UCU delegates spoke on a many different issues, including: sexual harassment, the gender pay gap, women's access to industrial injuries disablement benefits, period poverty, abortion rights, maternity rights, gender pensions gap (particularly relevant in UCU due to the casual nature of work and attacks on pensions), and gender equality in Iran.

Global solidarity was the theme of one session in which there were some powerful contributions from international speakers. Women in Ukraine, Turkey and Iraq told us about their lived experiences as women trade unionists during conflict and in post-conflict situations, highlighting the devastating impact of conflict on women and girls. The recording of the international panel is available to view here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lvru4pm0O_U

UCU president, Janet Farrar, chaired a fringe meeting on "Tackling misogyny – the role of trade unions". The motion voted on to go forward to TUC Congress was a composite motion on "Tackling and preventing sexual harassment in our movement and in the workplaces"

UCU nominated Joanna de Groot to stand for election to TUC women's committee and Joanna was subsequently re-elected with the second highest number of votes.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Chair: Jo Edge (University of Edinburgh).

Vice Chair: Pat Roche (Blackpool & Fylde College)

NEC women's seats:

Jo Edge (University of Edinburgh), Julie Hearn (Lancaster University), Regine Pilling (Capital City College Group), Emma Rees (University of Chester).

Elected at women's conference 2022 for two years: Vicky Blake (University of Leeds), Maria Chondrogianni (University of Westminster), Jennifer Dods (Leeds Beckett University), Gillian Jack (The Open University) and Victoria Showunmi (University College London).

Committee Secretary: Charlotte Nielsen, equality support official