**THE QUEEN’S SPEECH 2015 Bills relevant to women’s equality**

These are the Bills which speak directly to one or more of the 22 Calls for Action in the SW Women’s Manifesto, either positively or negatively. Many of the 22 are not addressed at all. There are also many which affect women (as well as their families) which do not touch directly on gender equality and are not covered here. It is noteworthy that the Calls for Action on women’s health equality are not addressed in any of the Bills, specifically the Health and Social Care Bill (P43)

# List of Bills taken from Lobby Briefing on Queen’s Speech.

Proposals for a Bill of Rights

Pages 75

Personal Tax Allowance

Pages 21-22

Childcare Bill

Pages 25-26

Full Employment and Welfare Benefits Bill

Pages 13-17

Buses Bill

Pages 100-101

Policing and Criminal Justice Bill

Pages 66-71

Victims of Crime

Pages 94-95

Charities (Protection and Social Investment) Bill

Pages 91-93

# Commentary against SW Women’s Manifesto calls for action

###  Proposals for a Bill of Rights (Overall)

“The Government will bring forward proposals for a Bill of Rights to replace the Human Rights Act. This would reform and modernise our human rights legal framework and restore common sense to the application of human rights laws. It would also protect existing rights, which are an essential part of a modern, democratic society, and better protect against abuse of the system and misuse of human rights laws.”

It is not at all clear how the ambition to repeal the Human Rights Act and replace it with something else will affect equalities law in the UK or the ability to make progress in cases where the equality law does not adequately cover the issue, such as human dignity in elder care. The best outcome would be failure of the repeal proposal, but failing that there is potentially a lot of work to do to write equalities law into any Bill of Rights.

### Personal Tax Allowance (Call for Action 1: A living wage)

“The legislation would ensure that future increases to the income tax personal

allowance reflect changes to the national minimum wage, so that individuals

working 30 hours a week on the national minimum wage do not pay income

tax.”

Contrary to statements made in the Tory manifesto, the issue of the Living Wage is not addressed in the Queen’s Speech or the proposed Bills. This commitment to put into law that the minimum wage will always be tax free rings very hollow for a number of reasons:

* It could be achieved by keeping the minimum wage low and below the tax threshold, rather than increasing the minimum wage and hence the tax threshold;
* A large proportion of minimum wage workers work fewer than 30 hours per week and are well below the tax threshold anyway;
* Women are more likely than men to be working part time at the minimum wage and will therefore benefit less than men, if at all, from this measure.

Raising the minimum wage to at least a living wage would be a more effective way of raising the income of working women, particularly those who currently earn below the tax threshold.

### Childcare Bill (Call for Action 2: Extended provision of Care)

“• To provide for an increased entitlement to 30 hours a week of free childcare (for

38 weeks of the year) to be made available to eligible working parents of three

and four year olds

• To require local authorities to publish information about the provision of childcare

in the local authority area, and other services or facilities which might be of

benefit to parents or prospective parents, or children or young persons in their

area.”

The headline commitment to increase to 30 hours a week the entitlement to free childcare is welcome. However, note should be taken of the caveats emerging in more detail on the proposed Bill, and the questions and comments from both users and providers.

* What does the term “eligible working parents” mean? Will this include self-employed? To qualify for 30 hours childcare do both parents in a couple have to be working at least 30 hours a week? And for how many weeks of the year?
* What do working parents with younger children as well as three and four year olds do about childcare if they want to work more hours?
* How will the entitlement apply to single parents?
* The restriction to 38 weeks of free entitlement adds a complication. What are working parents to do for the other 14 weeks of the year?
* The mechanism for implementing this entitlement is not specified but assuming it will be the same as the current arrangements it will not address the shortfalls in provision already being experienced.
	+ The main issue raised by providers is that the fees they are paid by Local Authority commissioners are not enough to cover the costs so that users paying their own fees are often charged more. This issue is made worse by a post code lottery, in which different Authorities pass on different amounts of the Government specified allowance. In the end, providers may not be prepared to increase the number of hours in response to this new entitlement.
	+ The issues for users include: the lack of provision close to where they live or work; the poor quality able to be supplied in view of the low fees from Authorities; restricted hours of opening of some providers.

These issues boil down to an undervaluing of childcare, with workers generally on low pay.

The other aspect of care raised in Call for Action 2 is that of care for the elderly. Women are in need of care more frequently than men, they provide most of the unpaid care and they are predominant in elder care employment. These issues appear not to be addressed in any of the proposed Bills, including the Health and Social Care Bill.

### Cities Devolution Bill, Full Employment and Welfare Benefits Bill & Buses Bill (Calls for Action 5: Access to decent jobs; and 7: Zero hour contracts)

“So our **Cities Devolution Bill** will allow them to bid for an elected mayor, with far more sway over planning, transport, policing and health.

**Full Employment and Welfare Benefits Bill**

• Create duties to report on:

o Progress towards our commitment to achieving full employment.

o Progress against meeting our target of 3 million new apprenticeships

o Progress on the Troubled Families Initiative.

**Buses Bill**

• The Bill would provide the option for combined authority areas with directly elected

Mayors to be responsible for the running of their local bus services.”

The issue of women’s unequal access to well paid jobs is not directly addressed by the Government’s programme. However, the devolution of planning powers provides an opportunity for local activists to engage with local authorities on developing policies and practices which advance equality of opportunity, as required by the Public Sector Equality Duty of Equality Act 2010.

Similarly, the Duties to be created to report on progress are not gendered, but provide an opportunity for women’s groups to ensure that any reporting is gender disaggregated.

It is noted that the Tory manifesto commitment to address abuse of workers is not reflected in these proposed Bills or the Queen’s Speech. [“We will also take further

steps to eradicate abuses of workers, such as non-payment of the Minimum Wage, exclusivity in zerohours contracts and exploitation of migrant workers.” P(21)]

### Full Employment and Welfare Benefits Bill (Calls for Action 8: Improved careers guidance)

“In addition, our future youth offer will:

• Put in place a new Youth Allowance for 18-21 year olds with stronger work related conditionality from Day 1. After 6 months they will be required to go on an apprenticeship, training or community work placement;

• Remove automatic entitlement to housing support for 18-21 year olds;

• Provide Jobcentre Plus adviser support in schools across England to supplement careers advice and provide routes into work experience and apprenticeships.”

These provisions of the Bill show that stick is being employed rather more than carrot as far as young people are concerned. The conditionality and removal of housing support will affect young women particularly hard where they become single parents through no fault of their own.

There is no suggestion about how JC+ will access schools with careers advice, given that they are already overstretched. There is also no response to a request by women’s organisations that careers advice should be designed to counter gender bias.

Full Employment and Welfare Benefits Bill (Call for Action 9: A halt to welfare cuts)

*“Working-age benefit freeze*

• The new legislation would freeze the main rates of the majority of working age

benefits, tax credits and Child Benefit for two years from 2016-17.

• Pensioners would be protected, as would benefits relating to the additional

costs of disability.

• Statutory payments, such as Statutory Maternity, Paternity, and Adoption Pay

would also be exempted.

*Lowering the benefit cap*

• The new legislation would lower the benefit cap so that the total amount of

benefits a non-working family can receive in a year would be £23,000.

• A cap at £23,000 is equivalent to gross family earnings of up to £29,000.

• Households are exempt where someone is entitled to Working Tax Credit or

is in receipt of benefits relating to additional costs of disability, or War

Widow’s and Widower’s Pension.”

These provisions are clearly the opposite of what women say they need to advance equality of opportunity. The key issue of freezing working age benefits will increase poverty amongst both working and non-working poor.

### Policing and Criminal Justice Bill & Victims of Crime Bill (Call for action 15: Domestic and Sexual Abuse)

“• Appeals: Extend the principle of “deport first, appeal later” from just criminal cases, to all immigration cases. In 2014 the last government cut the number of appeal rights but other than foreign criminals, migrants retain an in-country right of appeal against the refusal of a human rights claim. We will now extend the “deport first, appeal later” principle to all cases, except where it will cause serious harm.

**Policing and Criminal Justice Bill**

• Providing enhanced protections for children by, subject to consultation,

introducing sanctions for professionals who fail to take action on child abuse

where it is a professional responsibility to do so.

• The Bill will allow us to deliver a range of criminal justice reforms that will aim

to better protect the public build confidence and improve efficiency.

**Victims of Crime**

• Putting the key entitlements of the Victims Code in primary legislation;

• Right to make a Victim Personal Statement and read it out in court at

sentencing and at the Parole Board;”

As described in the briefings, these provisions are unclear on their potential impact on survivors of domestic or sexual abuse. There may be scope for women’s organisations to influence the detail?

### Charities (Protection and Social Investment) Bill (Calls for Action 17 +: Women’s power)

“• The Bill would extend the criteria for automatic disqualification from charity trusteeship, and would extend disqualification to senior management positions to better protect charities from the risk of abuse.”

There are in fact no provisions in the programme relevant to advancing women’s equality in power and influence. This particular provision might reduce it if the criteria for disqualification were drawn wrongly, so an area worth watching?