

Statement by Chris Huhne on Women in Society for WLD

Our Party must fight for the equality in society we claim to champion and our Party must be a visible example of that claim. Neither is currently the case.

It's quite clear from the 44,000 equal pay claims currently lodged with the employment tribunal; the appalling conviction rate of less than 5% of rape cases brought to justice; the high level of violence against women; the hideous continuation of slavery in human trafficking form; the failure to regulate prostitution; the lack of access to services; the gaping hole in rights for carers and the still desperate need for genuinely family friendly work places – that neither legislation nor good intentions are enough – not out there nor in our Party.

And outside of the unequivocal need to practise what we preach – surely as a political party, we are insane if we do not understand that women's votes are vital too.

So as Leader I propose to put equality back where it should be. Just as we now accept that all our policy has a green thread at its heart – I will make gender equality equally mainstreamed.

I will elevate the equality spokesperson to the Shadow Cabinet and allocate an early Opposition Day debate to the issues outlined above. I will personally take on the challenge of equality and expect the same of all my colleagues. I will set up an equalities commission to report on how those issues where women still face extraordinary discrimination, despite legislation, can be addressed so legislation is made to work. Having laws clearly is not enough.

As I said, our claim to fight discrimination and our ability to champion equality will be derided if we fail to reflect our values and beliefs. We will become unelectable – and rightly so.

I will set targets for representation both for the Commons and the Lords. For the Lords it will be 50 – 50 either by appointment under the current system or as the basis for the new elected Lords when that is instituted.

Until PR comes in for Westminster, the rebalancing of gender will remain a tougher nut to crack. But if we have not made a decent leap after the next elections with our mentoring, training, support and the excellent work of the Campaign for Gender Balance and Women Liberal Democrats, I will urgently put before the Party proposals for a one-off mechanism to change the status quo.

We are where we are – but staying there isn't an option!

