

Priorities for women in the digitalisation of the Labour Markets

Chi Onwurah MP

Shadow Minister for Industrial Strategy

The financial crisis, austerity, cuts to local authority spending and public services and globalisation have all led to changes in our Labour markets with significant impact on women, who tend to be concentrated in lower paid and part time jobs and have more care responsibilities.

Technology is causing further change and this is set to increase dramatically over the next few years. Last year's report from the World Economic Forum *Women and Work in the Fourth Industrial Revolution* predicted women would be the gender most affected, losing five jobs for every job gained.

Now as a Chartered Engineer. I consider myself a tech evangelist. I believe technology can and should be a force for progress. The digital economy could provide significant opportunities to redress the differential barriers which women still face but it could also exacerbate or entrench them. It needs the right social and regulatory environment if its benefits are to be equally shared. The Labour Party's Industrial Strategy Consultation – launched by Clive Lewis and myself – will help establish this environment.

Our industrial strategy has four tests – all of which are ultimately about people's lived experience of our economy.

First it must make Britain one of the most dynamic, competitive and productive economies in the world.

Second it must take our whole country with it, every region, every nation, every demographic.

Third it must be people-centred, providing good jobs and improving working conditions for people across the country.

Fourth, a successful industrial strategy will depend on – and create – a healthy business culture, one where entrepreneurs, leaders and hard-working employees are all rewarded.

Women's experiences are not an add-on to this, they are a central part of it. The industrial strategy will be values-driven, mission-oriented and challenge-led.

Almost every major piece of legislation that has improved the lives of working women has been introduced by a Labour Government. As well as the Sex Discrimination Act, Labour introduced the Equal Pay Act and the Equality Act. Labour brought in paternity leave in 2003 and in 2006 extended the right to statutory maternity leave to a full year, regardless of length of service.

Before the last Labour Government, it took a war for the state to even try to sort out childcare, Labour became the first peacetime administration to develop a childcare policy. By 2008 there were more than three times as many nursery places as there had been in 1997 and flagship policies such as Sure Start and tax credits made a significant difference to the lives of women, particularly single mothers.

Now we have to take that struggle, that work for gender justice, and adapt it to the requirements of the fourth industrial revolution. There are many different areas we need to look at, everything from algorithms to cyber security but I want to emphasise three in this blog:

Digital skills

Women make up only 17% of technology employees, 7% of professional engineers and 1% of electricians. That helps drive the pay gap as well as limiting the kind of tech we get. We need to ensure that girls and women have access to digital skills throughout their lives – lifelong learning. We also need to overcome cultural stereotyping that positions women as consumers of technology not creators of it.

Digital voices

The debate about what kind of society we want is critical to how technology is used for good. Women's voices tend to be excluded or diminished in that debate either because of online misogyny or lack of digital access. The net needs to be a safe space for women to participate.

Employment rights

Concentrated in part time and often low skilled and/or undervalued work, women are more dependent on good employment rights. Management by software algorithm may undermine these whether intentionally or not, and may also have disparate impact on women. We need to ensure that the so called gig economy offers both the protection and empowerment working women deserve and have earned.

In developing our industrial strategy Jack Dromey, shadow minister for Labour and I will be looking at a number of practical measures. Transparency requirements can help drive change – sharing pay ratios between genders can highlight where women are hitting the glass ceiling. Access to in work skills training can prepare women for the jobs of the future.

We'll also be looking at diversity charters – voluntary systems where businesses sign up to certain levels of diversity. These can be promoted by Government, to make sure trailblazers are recognised and rewarded.

Getting this right matters for women, for businesses and for our economy. Organisations and nations that do not take full advantage of the wide range of creativity and talent on offer are depriving themselves and our country of potential and competitiveness. We cannot afford to do that.