Revelation at the recent outcome of a rape trial in Ireland where a man was acquitted of raping a 17-year-old girl after a jury heard she was wearing a thong with a lace front has led to impassioned calls for the end of ‘victim blaming’ in the courts.

CWU Women’s Conference delegates unanimously committed the Women’s Advisory Committee (WAC) to run a campaign to remind members that “No means No” after a highly emotional debate in which one brave delegate revealed that she herself had been a victim of rape.

Many delegates had tears in their eyes as Zoe Walmsley (pictured, right) of West Yorkshire branch recounted how her disgust at the Irish case had prompted her to share her own personal experience for the first time ever.

“1 was raped at the age of 15 - I had the support of my family and I did pluck up the courage to go to the authorities,” Zoe began.

“When my case was brought to Court I was made to feel as if I had instigated and provoked the attack by the defence barrister.

“You’re made to relive the event in full and it’s a very traumatic experience.

“For this man in Ireland to be acquitted of this despicable charge because a woman chose to wear a thong with a lace front is absolutely disgusting.

“Whatever a woman chooses to wear is her prerogative and doesn’t give anyone the right to assume she wants to have sex with them,” concluded Zoe, as delegates jumped to their feet to give her an emotional standing ovation.

Rachel Moon of the North East Regional Women’s Committee hit out at the prevalence of ‘victim blaming’ in rape trials - applauding the protest of a female Irish parliamentarian who’d responded to the case by holding up a thong in the Republic of Ireland’s lower chamber, asking fellow members to consider how rape victims must feel at having their underwear studied in court.

Erin Massey of Northern Ireland Telecom Branch recalled the infamous recent trial in Belfast of three rugby players - all of whom were also acquitted of rape after a highly adversarial courtroom drama during which the victim’s underwear was also passed round the Jury for inspection.

“It beggars belief - it’s ridiculous,” she stressed.

Irrespective of whether someone has attended an after-party, or choses to wear a thong, rape is rape and no means no.”

Holly Bate of Gloucestershire Amal recalled the tragic case of a 17-year-old rape victim who took her own life after telling her parents that the court case had made it feel like she was raped all over again.

WAC member Karen Kendrick lashed out at the “mythologies and stereotypes that come up time after time in rape cases,” concluding: “There’s clearly more to do.”

Striving for proportionality for women in the CWU

Despite all the hard work conducted in recent years to address the issue of proportionality in the CWU, the number of women active in the union is still way below acceptable levels.

That was the unanimous view of delegates at the CWU’s 2019 Women’s Conference in Liverpool last month - where the importance of ensuring the union’s on-going Redesign agenda provides the positive platform required for a much-needed sea change loomed large in several passionate debates.

In his keynote speech, general secretary Dave Ward stressed: “We want women playing an active role in every part of the CWU, right up to the top.”

Delegates unanimously agreed that action to achieve that aim must include a drive to inform new female joiners of the potential to actively participate in the life of the union and campaigns to encourage more women to stand as branch chairs, secretaries, treasurers and industrial reps.

See full Women’s Conference report at www.cwu.org/news/womens-conf-2019/ and also page 24 of The Voice
“Connection and collectivism” will mark the union’s future approach to equalities, explained general secretary Dave Ward as he outlined how the CWU will increase and strengthen its fight against racial discrimination and prejudice.

Leading an innovative ‘Question Time’ style discussion at the CWU’s Black Workers Conference in Birmingham in January, Dave and national officer Trish Lavelle – who has recently had equal opportunities added to her education and training duties – took questions from the audience on the new, mainstreaming strategy the union is moving towards.

Joining them on the panel were Ian Taylor (North West & North Wales divisional rep), Winston Richards (Greater London Branch officer) and Sharon Pratt (South West No.7 Branch officer) – and the team were quizzed on multiculturalism in education, the challenge of increasing the involvement of black and minority ethnic (BAME) women, all-women shortlists and how to bring forward new reps and activists.

In answer to a question on how the new mainstreaming strategy will address issues such as the struggle against the far-right racists, our general secretary explained how moving from separate ‘equality-strand’ conferences to a whole day of motion-based equality debate, discussion and decision-making during Annual General Conference will make this “something we debate in front of the whole membership” and will “bring this debate into the workplace.”

The two words “connection and collectivism” summed up the new strategy, he said.

Trish highlighted the new “14 measures” – standards which the national leadership will be helping branches to achieve – as an example of how support for reps, and for equality activity, will be improved, while Ian said that he hoped that the changes would bring the union “closer to the workplaces” and would “increase the support for reps out there.”

Positive role models are key to greater involvement of BAME women, suggested Sharon, who explained that this meant “having people out there to look up to and identify with,” while Winston responded to a question about the possibility of all-women shortlists or all-BAME shortlists.

Earlier, delegates had approved eight unopposed policy resolutions, two of which – campaigning against the far-right Football Lads Alliance and fighting for compensation for the victims of the Windrush scandal – were chosen for submission to CWU General Conference in April.

The other six successful motions covered the welfare of individuals in immigration detention centres, the impact of the Mental Health Act on the BAME community, action against knife crime, opposition to the caste system, and support for a campaign to demand a formal apology from the UK government for the 1919 Amritsar massacre.

And in between the debates, Conference also welcomed two guest speakers – Ismail Patel, from Friends of Al Aqsa, who spoke about the plight of the Palestinian people and Fazia Shaheen, from think tank CLASS, who outlined the growing economic inequality in the UK.

Midlands Region secretary Kate Hudson thanked the 95 delegates and 31 observers from 70 CWU branches for attending, adding she was proud her region was hosting the Conference.

By way of highlighting the continuing need to fight racism in all its forms, Kate played the disturbing YouTube footage of a recent attack on a young Syrian schoolboy refugee and stressed how important it is for people “not to just stand by, but to stand up and help. “Now more than ever we need to speak out and we need to educate,” she concluded. “Now recharge your batteries and keep on with what you all do best.”

Bringing equality into the mainstream: See page 24 of The Voice.
Standing firm against transphobia

A major new drive to support trans rights and to raise awareness of trans issues amongst the wider CWU membership began in earnest at the union’s 2019 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Conference.

Amid heightened concern at a rising tide of hostility towards one of the LGBT community’s most embattled groups, delegates in Liverpool last month delivered a resounding message of support to trans people who have faced an exponential upsurge in both physical and verbal attacks following the launch of a Government’s consultation on reform of the Gender Recognition Act of 2014.

Delegates unanimously passed a motion calling for the union to adopt a more prominent role in supporting transgender rights after hearing that two in five transgender people had experienced hate crime in the last full year for which statistics are available.

Proposing the motion, Des Gibbons of Nottingham & District Amal Branch explained: “2018 saw an unprecedented rise in transphobia...and several small but vociferous groups have formed with an anti-trans message. One such group even disrupted the 2018 London Pride event.”

Tara Morgan of Greater Manchester Branch continued: “The last year has been absolutely horrendous. Three weeks ago a friend of mine committed suicide because of all this shit. We’ve been accused of being everything from child molesters to god knows what. “The events at London Pride were really shocking to a lot of my lesbian friends and, in response, Manchester Lesbians organised themselves at Manchester Pride and what they did was really moving: At the front of the march there was this huge banner reading ‘Manchester Lesbians – Stand By Your Trans’. We’re not having people coming to Manchester trying to divide our community.”

Maria Exall of Greater London Combined added: “It’s important we’re clear sighted about this as LGBT-plus and equality activists - because we’ve always stood for there being no ‘hierarchy of oppression’.

“As someone who is a lesbian I was upset there were lesbian activists disrupting the Pride march in London in the name of lesbian rights, when actually they were just being anti-trans.”

Sarah Pitt of Eastern No.4 agreed: “They call themselves radical, but it’s not radical to be phobic - it’s fascist.

“I’m lucky because I come from a delivery officer where we have three people who are transitioning...but there are lots of other places where people are on their own, don’t know what to do and the thoughts come all the time about suicide.

“We need education for our members, and especially for our reps. CWU reps could be our trans people’s best friends - our biggest support.”

EDUCATION THE ANSWER

The theme of trans-awareness training had earlier been raised by CWU national officer for equal opportunities, education and training, Trish Lavelle (pictured left), who revealed her department was already in the process of producing a workplace negotiators’ guide on trans issues, in addition to a trans awareness course.

LGBT Conference delegates, however, resolved that even more was required, unanimously passing a Greater London Combined Branch motion calling for the development of a comprehensive campaigning strategy to support trans rights, including training for union activists, and a trans awareness programme for rolling out in all 10 of the union’s regions.

Proposing that motion, which delegates subsequently voted to forward to April’s CWU General Conference, Jasmin Parsons recounted how her own experiences had convinced her of the need for taboos surrounding transgender to be broken.

“A lot of myth still surrounds trans people, whether they are transgendering from male to female or female to male - and the concept (behind the motion) is that the membership needs to be made more aware. We need posters and things like that, and safe places for people to talk so they can better understand where we come from,” Jasmin concluded.

I was upset there were lesbian activists disrupting the Pride march in London in the name of lesbian rights, when actually they were just being anti-trans

See full LGBT Conference report at www.cwu.org/news/lgbt-conf-2019/ and also page 24 of The Voice
Equality at work – a level playing field for disabled workers

“A level playing field for workers with disabilities,” is the core aim of the union’s work in this equality strand, explained Trish Lavelle in her speech to the Disability Conference in Birmingham.

The union’s head of education, training and equal opportunities set out how the increasing attention being given to mental health in the workplace, and in particular the introduction of mental health first aid training for reps, illustrated how “our equality work is directly supporting mainstream industrial activity.”

And there is a lot of work to do in this field, she continued, pointing out that “our reps are taking on more and more disability-related cases, and doing a magnificent job representing members,” working with employers and challenging them where needed on issues around reasonable adjustments in the workplace – the key arena where the ongoing fight for equality is being waged.

Disability Advisory Committee (DAC) chair Tony Sneddon highlighted the extra impact that the period of austerity has had on disabled people, with a 53.3 per cent employment rate in comparison to an 81.4 per cent employment rate of non-disabled people.

Paying tribute to campaigners such as Disabled People Against Cuts, as well as the members of the union’s DAC, for their work addressing such inequality, Tony told the audience: “Go forward in 2019 proud of what we’ve achieved in the disability movement.”

General secretary Dave Ward also highlighted the disproportionate economic situation for disabled people, telling delegates that “four in 10 disabled people will be living in relative poverty in the UK today.

“Inequality is increasing and we have a responsibility to do something about it,” he insisted, and outlined the measures the CWU is planning to take in order to raise the profile of this critically important equality strand, including regional networks, a full-voting NEC representative, and dedicated Annual General Conference sessions discussing and debating this issue.

In her welcome speech, Midland Region secretary Kate Hudson focused on an important industrial dispute currently taking place in Birmingham, where some 250 homecare workers are fighting imposed cuts to pay and services by their local authority employer.

The whole conference stood holding up messages of solidarity and support, while Kate said: “We stand shoulder to shoulder with the Birmingham homecare workers – fighting for their jobs, for decent pay, and to protect vital services to vulnerable people.”

FULL AGENDA

Seven policy resolutions were approved by January’s Disability Conference, one of which – on disability related sickness at BT – was chosen by T&FS delegates for submission to this year’s T&FS National Conference, while two others – one relating to disability friendly communications and the other concerning the Mental Health Act – were chosen for submission to this year’s National General Conference.

Two guests – disability campaigners David Buxton and Suzanne Bull – both gave informative, interesting and thought-provoking speeches, which sparked lively discussions.

And the closing session saw Dave Ward, Trish Lavelle and Tony Sneddon line up with DAC members Mark Bastiani and NEC members Nick Darbyshire for a ‘Question Time’ chaired by Tony Pedel.

Once again, this format proved popular with delegates, who grilled the panel on a range of disability-related issues, including recruitment, employment policies, and the need to ensure full involvement of Annual Conference delegates in the planned Conference Equality Day.

But the most moving contribution of the day came from South Central Postal member Amar Ahmed, who won a standing ovation from the hall for his speech, in which he told Conference of his severe spinal injury, his ongoing struggle and treatment, and thanked the CWU and in particular his workplace and branch representatives, for helping to win his return to work.

“I want to thank the union for fighting for me,” he told Conference, adding that he is determined to keep on fighting for his own health and giving his best wishes to the audience for a successful conference and their ongoing struggle for disability rights at work.

Four in 10 disabled people will be living in relative poverty in the UK today