

# Addressing women's issues and devising helpful policy solutions requires that women are not seen as separate from the rest of society

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**Linnéa Sandström** reviews last night's **British Government@LSE** and Fawcett Society pre-election mayoral debate: [What About Women?](#)



On Monday April 23<sup>rd</sup>, three mayoral hopefuls and Conservative campaigner Victoria Borwick arrived at the LSE to debate the topic "what about women?". The discussion ranged from gender budgeting to women's security on the streets.

Boris Johnson, the current mayor standing for re-election, was missing from the debate – a fact that did not go unnoticed in the Twitterverse where several people seemed confounded by his absence. Victoria Borwick acted as Boris's substitute which may have actually appeased some women who, like women in the US, are [increasingly annoyed by having only men discuss women's issues](#).

With London recently having been named [the worst place in the UK to be a woman](#) it would certainly have been interesting to hear Johnson's ideas on how to change the city's reputation. Unfortunately Borwick was restricted to highlighting what had been done in the past and could not make any definitive statements or promises. She did give some insight into the policy priorities of London Conservatives but her perspectives are not the ones standing in line at the ballot box.

Questions had been submitted in advance and ranged from the commitment to publishing and gender assessing the Mayor's budget to quotas, violence against women, objectification in the media and work-life balance. While there were many issues that the candidates agreed on such as transparency, access to abortion and reproductive health care, and the urgency of providing better services to survivors of rape and domestic violence, there were also issues they disagreed on such as the necessity for gender quotas in various institutions.

Given the current economic climate, some topics stood out as more interesting than others, particularly those that involved policies directly affecting women's employment. While all candidates agreed that access to part-time jobs and flexibility of working times needed to be increased, the real gender implications could be seen when the issue of childcare was raised. In the UK, [as well as across Europe](#), women are far more likely to be in part-time jobs than men and they are more likely to cite childcare as a reason for why they choose to work part-time.

Although the candidates respected women's autonomy and freedom to choose their employment, it seemed very odd that none of the candidates once asked *why* women chose to trade their higher paid jobs for lower paid, lower status jobs. Instead, Borwick continued to refer to women as carers and, while women certainly do take on the larger part of caring within the household, the underpinning logic was never questioned. The role was assumed to be a given in the experience of being a woman. It was noticeable that both Jenny Jones (Green Party) and Borwick, the two female debaters on the panel, kept on talking about a 'sisterhood' as if women and their issues can be homogenised.

The logic then followed that reaching a critical mass of women within institutions would without doubt lead to a 'woman-friendly' world where more part-time jobs and more flexible work schedules would be made available. Anyone who attended [the debate arranged by the European Parliament in](#)

London on [2<sup>nd</sup> March this year](#), would know that this is not necessarily the case. Businesswoman Heather McGregor argued that the reason why a lot of women are not represented on boards is because they are not willing to make the tough choices necessary to have a successful career.

Meanwhile, Brian Paddick, Liberal Democrat, argued that ‘daddy months’ (a month or several reserved just for the father, or as in Sweden’s gender neutral legislation, for each parent) should not be included in parental leave because the family needs to be able to make those choices themselves. By comparison Swedish parental leave guarantees that [each parent is entitled to half the parental leave and 60 non-transferrable days](#). Despite this, women in Sweden still take [75 per cent of the total parental leave even though 85 per cent of fathers take some parental leave](#). The lack of willingness on Paddick’s part to lobby for policies targeted at men’s parenting practices would seem to do little to bring gender equality into lives of women.

Labour candidate Ken Livingstone discussed the difficulties of working women in London to undertake childcare responsibilities while also having to travel on average 40 minutes to work. He argued, along with all the other candidates, that childcare needs to be more accessible. If combined with Paddick’s promise to introduce a part-time travel card for part-time workers, the situation may at least be improved. However, it does nothing to challenge the role of women as primary caretakers, which is what leads them to take on lower paid part-time jobs in the first place.

The seeming unwillingness to include men in the debate put the candidates in a position where they tried to address one half of the issues they spoke about while completely neglecting the other. Trying to frame working mothers and women in part-time as the issue does little to address the underlying structures in society that continue to put women, rather than men, in the position in part-time, low status and low earning jobs. In order to fully address women’s issues and come with helpful policy suggestions the candidates need to address women not as separate from the rest of society, but as a part of the structure in which men and women co-exist.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

## **About the author**

**Linnéa Sandström** is an MSc student in Gender, Policy and Inequalities at the Gender Institute in the LSE. She is also a member of the [Engenderings](#) blog editorial team.

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