

# TOWARDS A FEMINIST GREEN NEW DEAL FOR THE UK

A PAPER FOR THE WBG COMMISSION ON A  
GENDER-EQUAL ECONOMY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper maps out the common themes in existing Green New Deal (GND) plans that are specific to the UK and analyses them using a feminist analytical framework that combines dimensions of substantive gender equality and principles of feminist ecological economics. It discusses the potential as well as the problems in existing GND plans and responds with a set of recommendations for what a feminist green new deal for the UK that addresses the goals of substantive gender equality and living within ecological limits would entail.

### **These recommendations are:**

- a) Recognise that the gender division of unpaid care work drives substantive gender inequality and that policies for a 'just transition' must address the gender gap by redistributing and reducing it.
- b) Future-proof employment in a decarbonised economy through life-long learning.
- c) Connect local and national GND policies to a commitment to global justice.
- d) Promote participatory town planning to co-create spaces with those who use them.
- e) Transform food supply chains to enable socially just and environmentally sustainable food production, distribution and consumption.
- f) Implement shorter hours of employment alongside policies to promote gender equality in paid and unpaid work.
- g) Ensure GND plans are developed through an inclusive and democratic process.
- h) Implement community wealth building to address gender and environmental concerns locally.
- i) Embed feminist substantive equality goals at all stages and in all policy strands of a GND.
- j) Promote a culture shift towards valuing care as foundational to the economy, society and environmental sustainability.
- k) Transform social and physical infrastructure to ensure social reproduction is equally shared and uses resources efficiently.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Proposals for a Green New Deal (GND) that will reform national economies while dramatically reducing CO2 emissions have been in development around the world for over a decade. There is now a range of groups advocating a GND and plans share a commitment to a 'just transition' to a 'green economy' and are framed by the urgent need for a 21st century industrial strategy in the face of a climate emergency.

GND proposals and plans have paid little attention to gender equality and until recently there has been insufficient critical engagement with environmental and climate politics by mainstream feminists. As a result of efforts by feminist environmentalists, there is growing scrutiny of the gendered assumptions contained in GND visions and an emerging conversation about how a GND could be good for gender justice if feminist environmental goals were incorporated.



## 2. EXISTING GREEN NEW DEAL PLANS IN THE UK

The idea for a GND was first articulated in the UK in 2007 as a comprehensive response to twin financial and climate crises and was modelled on US President Roosevelt's New Deal to recover from the Great Depression. It began with the formation of a Green New Deal Group and has culminated in the Decarbonisation and Economic Strategy Bill, [2] which was presented to the House of Commons in March 2019.[3] The GND was central to the Labour Party and Green Party manifestos [4] for the 2019 general election. There has been some progress towards GND formation in devolved administrations, with Scotland leading the rest of the UK by adopting 'Protecting Scotland's Future' as a programme of government in 2019-20. [5]

There is a continuum of approaches taken by different groups. The Bill is considerably less radical in its ambition, so as to gain wide cross-party support, whereas the Green Party Manifesto and the visions expressed by non-governmental think tanks, such as the New Economics Foundation (NEF) [6] and Common Wealth, [7] can be much more radical because they are unlikely to be implemented.

This section looks at the main themes found in the most dominant iterations of a GND in the UK, namely the [Decarbonisation and Economic Strategy Bill](#), the [Labour Party 2019 Manifesto](#), the [Green Party 2019 Manifesto](#), and reports by NEF and Common Wealth.



## 2.1 COMMON THEMES

**Decarbonising the economy:** focus is on the decarbonisation of the energy, transportation and housing/building sectors using large scale public and private investment.

**Democratising the economy:** plans champion new forms of ownership, a rebalancing of power between public and private institutions and increased devolution, aided by appropriate financing from Central Government.

**A 'socially just transition' :** entails redressing economic inequality through the creation of jobs in new green industries along with a related dimension of equality of access through improved transport infrastructure and an expansion in training and development opportunities.

**Preserving the natural environment:** restoring biodiversity and building resilience in the form of tree-planting, rewilding, restoring habitats and river catchments, as well as policies to promote reduction in air pollution and the use of plastics, pesticides and other chemicals.

**Reform of finance and banking systems:** GND policies would be funded using tax reform, banking reform (in the shape of national/green investment banks and regional banking), and government borrowing.

**Governance and oversight:** so far GND thinking has been primarily expert-led with a focus on financial reform and industrial strategy, although some think tanks champion a more placed-based approach with local strategies supported by national government.

**International responsibilities:** proposals emphasise the need for a global just transition facilitated by a new multilateral internationalism in which finance, resource and technology transfers are made from Global North to Global South in order to redress historic debts and inequalities.

### 3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyse these common themes in GND plans, this paper applies a framework consisting of four feminist principles of substantive equality and two principles central to feminist ecological economics. This combination enables a comprehensive evaluation, not only of how policies might affect women's lives, but also how the struggle for gender equality is related to the urgent need to protect, and live within the limits of, the biophysical environment and climate system.

Although gender equality has been enshrined in law, women are regularly disadvantaged because they are women, in ways that are shaped by how gender intersects with other categories of social difference such as race, class, age, and dis/ability. Because legal equality, which treats women the same as men, does not lead to structural transformation, feminists call for substantive equality.

A four-dimensional and **intersectional approach to substantive gender equality entails** the following:

- **Redressing material and social disadvantages** experienced by women that stem from gendered power relations and gender income gaps.
- **Transforming social structures** in order to bring about a fair distribution of power and resources and fundamental change in the institutions and infrastructures (social and built) that perpetuate women's subordination.
- **Facilitating political participation and social inclusion** in ways that enable women's agency and gives voice to a wide range of needs and interests that are shaped by intersections of gender, race, class, age, ability and other axes of social difference.
- **Countering the misogynist stereotypes, trivialisation, and violence** that contribute to denying women dignity and respect, at the same time as countering the valorisation and normalisation of traits and life patterns that sustain male privilege.[8]



**Feminist ecological economics** [9] recognises connections between the exploitation of feminised care work and the exploitation of the Earth's resources. It sees ecological/climate emergency and the crisis of social reproduction (often referred to simply as care [10] ) as interlinked and mutually sustaining, arising from the overburdening of those who carry responsibility for social reproduction, the vast majority of whom are women.

**Social reproduction (SR) refers to the daily and generational renewal of life that is essential to sustaining societies and their economies. SR requires work, and in capitalism, this work is feminised and undervalued. SR involves unpaid care and domestic work as well as paid work in public services (health and social care, education), community volunteering, and environmental maintenance and stewardship.**

Women who bear the responsibility for care are also increasingly shouldering the costs ensuing from the ecological crisis as well as measures to redress it. What has come to be known as the 'feminisation of environmental labour'[11] leads to time poverty, which in turn may complicate or reduce women's ability to participate in pro-environmental actions in private and public spheres.

The performance of unpaid care and domestic labour by women in individual households is not only a free subsidy that enables continual capitalist growth, in rich countries such as the UK, it also makes possible a consumer culture that is widely recognised as having exceeded the biophysical limits of a finite planet. Central to feminist ecological economics is the normative claim that gender equality should not be achieved at the expense of ecological degradation or the exploitation of nature and other species, and that environmental sustainability must not be achieved by exploiting feminised labour.

**Drawing on these insights, two further principles are added to the analytical framework: [12]**

- **Recognising paid and unpaid care work as central components of both the economy and systems that sustain life.**
- **Reducing the social and ecological costs of privatised social reproduction by distributing it fairly within society and by organising it in ways that enable efficient use of time and material resources and minimal waste.**



## 4. FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF EXISTING GND PLANS

Feminists have been critically analysing environmental concepts and policies, such as sustainable development, degrowth, and green economy, for well over three decades. A recurring criticism is that much of what gets discussed in the environmental sphere is male dominated, rooted in orthodox economic thinking, celebrates technological fixes and rarely includes social issues in general, and intersectional gender equality in particular.[13]

While all expressions of a GND in the UK place importance on decarbonisation and increasing economic equality, they place far more emphasis on the green aspects, than they place on specific strategies for increasing substantive social justice along the lines defined in section 3. Gender roles, norms and relations are not meaningfully considered. As a result, there is a lack of acknowledgement of the links between the climate crisis and gender inequality, and addressing gender inequality is not considered in plans for decarbonising the economy.

When the six principles from the feminist analytical framework (outlined above) are applied to GND plans, the following assessments and recommendations can be made. Recommendations in each section build on existing GND policies and do not constitute a standalone, comprehensive vision. They take for granted basic aspects of a GND (such as ending the extraction of fossil fuels and adopting legally binding targets for decarbonisation) and are intended to start a conversation by making recommendations that respond to feminist principles of substantive equality and ecological justice, thereby giving a provisional answer to the question: **what would a feminist GND for the UK entail?**



## 4.1 REDRESSING MATERIAL DISADVANTAGE AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

GND plans tend to define equality and justice in economic terms. Most aim to reduce economic inequality through job creation. While some women will have opportunities for paid work in a new green economy, due to the overrepresentation of men employed in the focal sectors (i.e., energy, construction and transport), the creation of new, high quality work in these industries will disproportionately benefit men. There is little evidence that green jobs will address gender inequalities and could even entrench them further.[14] The Labour Party Manifesto does offer training bursaries to women, BAME people and people on low incomes, but none of the proposals adequately address barriers to women's economic equality. Only the Green Party Manifesto proposes universal basic income (UBI), a policy that could potentially address women's material disadvantage and give them greater financial independence, although we acknowledge divisions among feminists regarding the desirability of UBI. [15]

Although job creation is the main tool through which plans address social inequality in a decarbonised economy, none of them recommend expanding existing low-carbon and socially fundamental jobs in the care and service industries, which are female-dominated sectors employing many BAME and migrant women. A socially just green economy needs to focus not just on reforming and reducing carbon-intensive industries but also investing in already low-carbon social infrastructure (i.e., services and facilities that meet needs and contribute towards a good quality of life). This requires more than encouraging women/BAME workers to participate in the construction of physical infrastructure, but also promoting and transforming the care, service and voluntary sectors and rethinking what work counts as part of a just and sustainable society.

As another contribution to this Commission shows, [16] for structural reasons, women-dominated sectors are at risk of increasing automation. Lifelong learning opportunities, paid educational leave and incentives must be used as tools to future-proof the work of women by supporting them into green jobs. There must also be efforts to encourage women and girls into the male-dominated green technology sectors in view of the fact that 'only 17% of tech jobs are held by women, and boys are far more likely to express an intention to work in technology than girls'.[17]

## 4.1 REDRESSING MATERIAL DISADVANTAGE AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY CONT/

Changes in taxation and subsidies by their nature entail winners and losers. None of the current plans have carried out a gender analysis on proposed changes to taxation and subsidies. It is essential that increasing taxes on fossil fuels be accompanied by other measures, so that they are fiscally neutral and income neutral for low- and middle-income people.

While UK-specific change is important, it cannot proceed without constant consideration of impacts on people and places in other parts of the planet. A just transition includes global climate justice, which will require a fundamental rethinking of the UK's role in racist and neo-colonial international relations (e.g. its involvement in tax havens, off-shoring and militarism) and ending the hostile environment for immigrants to the UK. To differing degrees, existing GND plans include such commitments.

From a feminist perspective what is missing, however, is recognition of the international gender division of labour, especially how transnational 'care chains' [18] sustain the UK economy and socio-economic disadvantage of women immigrants and migrant workers. There is also no mention of protecting sexual and reproductive rights, which are threatened by neo-Malthusian population reduction campaigns led by some of the most prominent environmentalists in the UK.[19]. A feminist GND for the UK would acknowledge the need to repay debts and heal harms caused in the UK's colonial past, as well as its racist and misogynist present, by the finance, development, military and care/service sectors. [20]



## 4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

### **A. Recognise that the gender division of unpaid care work drives substantive gender inequality and that policies for a 'just transition' must address the gender gap by redistributing and reducing it.**

- Embed policies for fostering sharing of unpaid care between men and women, such as universal childcare and paid parental and care leave.
- Implement large scale investment in all forms of social infrastructure.
- Require organisations to collect and report on their gender pay and employment gaps.

### **B. Future-proof employment in a decarbonised economy through life-long learning.**

- Provide subsidies or other incentives (including paid education leave) to support women, low-income and BAME people to access training and development programmes and give more people access to high-skilled work in the new green economy.
- Provide subsidies or other incentives to support those whose jobs are at a high risk of being replaced by automation in order to future-proof employment.
- Encourage women and girls into male-dominated green sectors promoted by the GND, as well as encouraging boys and men into the already green caring sectors.
- Education and training should be led by local authorities who understand the skills gaps in their localities. Training need not be de facto in green technologies, but in a range of sectors and jobs (including care, education and environmental protection) that are locally needed.

### **C. Connect local and national GND policies to a commitment to global justice.**

- End the hostile environment for immigrants.
- Hold transnational corporations to account for practices that exploit people, animals and the environment for profit.
- Put the justice demands of marginalised and exploited groups at the centre of national and international policy-making and guarantee the protection of human rights, including reproductive and sexual rights.

## 4.2 STRUCTURAL AND INFRASTRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION

The outcomes of current GND proposals, such as better transport systems and energy efficient housing, might well improve the lives of women. However, proposals for large infrastructural transformations give little attention to how the technical and the social intersect. For example, houses are designed to be energy efficient with no change in the design aspects that lock in traditional nuclear family assumptions or the habits of a throw-away culture.[21] Green goals are pursued without the gendered implications being fully considered, and there is no suggestion that the needs and life patterns of diverse women are being considered by planners, architects and engineers when redesigning the built environment.

The food industry is responsible for almost 26% of global carbon emissions [22 ]. Radical changes in the production, processing and distribution of food are needed. Several of the GND plans address food production and consumption, with some calling for decarbonised, people-focussed farming via urban growing and community farms. These plans are welcome, however there has been no consideration of the gendered implications of a move towards unprocessed food and increased DIY provisioning. Nor does there appear to be any discussion of the opportunities to create jobs in sustainable food preparation and delivery companies to ensure that any added burden does not fall on those most responsible for food provisioning in households (i.e., women).

Changes to typical temporal structures could reduce negative environmental impacts, and the move to a four-day work week is part of some but not all GND plans. When included, it is a response to the effects of automation that are predicted to take over from workers' time, and to some extent aims at redistributing work to create employment equality. From a feminist perspective, a shorter paid work week also has considerable potential to redistribute unpaid care more equitably, and policies that facilitate this (such as UBI, universal childcare and reformed paternity leave) should be promoted alongside it. [23] However, feminist critics argue that progress towards equal sharing of care and domestic work in heterosexual couple households requires not more time at home but a cultural shift in how men and women are expected to use their time when not in paid employment. [24]

## 4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

### **D. Promote participatory town planning to co-create spaces with those who use them.**

- Ensure that physical infrastructure is designed with local communities to accommodate the life patterns of women and other marginalised groups at the same time as green goals.

### **E. Transform food supply chains to enable socially just and environmentally sustainable food production, distribution and consumption.**

- Balance recommendations for greater food self-reliance with recognition of the gendered, unpaid and low-paid labour involved in producing and providing food.
- Support and develop sustainable small businesses that save time by mass preparation and distribution of locally grown food.
- Improve food certification schemes to go beyond just 'organic' to ensure ethical and sustainable food production.

### **F. Implement shorter hours of employment alongside policies to promote gender equality in paid and unpaid work.**

- Implement a 30-hour paid work week.
- Actively incentivise and normalise care leaves for men.
- Conduct research and monitoring in order to assess the benefits of UBI for addressing the gender gap and any unintended environmental consequences it might have (e.g. increased consumption).



## 4.3 INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION

‘A precursor to policy change is a proper public debate and wider awareness of the problems,’ [25] yet most of the idea generation for GND policies in the UK has come from political parties and think tanks made up of economists, policy experts, and journalists. This can be contrasted with Canada and the USA, where social movements have been active in shaping GND debates. [26] Thus far there is no widespread public conversation or consultation process to inform GND visions in the UK.

How would a GND be agreed and implemented? Governance features in all existing plans, with the Decarbonisation and Economic Strategy Bill calling for the establishment of a Green New Deal Commission that, while representative, would be a top-down, parliamentary body. Although both Common Wealth and NEF recognise the need for bottom-up transformation, only trade unions and generic ‘communities’ are named, with no mention of particular constituencies (such as women, BAME people, im/migrants, LGBTQI people, youth, elders, disabled people, etc.) or of specific methods for ensuring meaningful grassroots participation. This absence of inclusive civil society engagement could in part explain the invisibility of gender in existing GND plans.

All the proposals argue for decentralisation and democratic control of local economies. They call for new forms of ownership in the form of co-operatives, worker/community-owned enterprises, public/municipal enterprises and more. These changes could benefit women by increasing female participation and power within decision-making processes and embedding gender equality from the start. To ensure the best access possible, these would need to go hand in hand with the provision of necessary support to participate (e.g. childcare, accessible spaces) as well as recognition of inequalities among women.

The contribution to this Commission [27] on community wealth building [28] demonstrates the power of this model in promoting decent work in ways that address multiple problems with the current economic model. These principles could be applied to the caring industries and the energy and transport sectors, among others with deep links to the local community. They could be a way to promote apprenticeships and training and increase female representation in male-dominated industries. They could be used in conjunction with national strategies relating to finance, transport and the National Grid and would be supported with better policies for funding local and regional government.



## 4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

### **G. Ensure GND plans are developed through an inclusive and democratic process.**

- Build capacity for meaningful democratic participation, which could include increasing economic, ecological and carbon literacy through public broadcasting and social media.
- Require consultations and decision-making bodies to be gender balanced and reflective of the diversity of the UK population.
- Require involvement of civil society organisations and citizens so that plans reflect diverse needs, experiences and knowledge. An inclusive process must include continuous review.
- Experiment with alternative models of deliberation, such as mini-publics and citizens' assemblies, empowered to make binding recommendations to governments.

### **H. Implement community wealth building to address gender and environmental concerns locally.**

- Use anchor institutions [29] to promote sustainable business, decent work for women and retain wealth created in the local area.
- Support new forms of ownership, such as cooperatives and community owned enterprises, using the community wealth building model.

## 4.4 COUNTERING MISOGYNY AND MALE PRIVILEGE

No GND plans include any measures to redress gender bias, much less to counter misogyny or male privilege, appearing to accept the status quo without question. With little or no mention of gender, they take for granted masculine norms. For example, the excitement over the number of green jobs that will be created does not acknowledge that the vast majority will be concentrated in male-dominated sectors, nor the fact that female-dominated sectors like social and childcare are already low carbon.

GND language valorises historical periods and gendered norms that feminists have criticised. [30] The very framing of the plans as a 'Green New Deal' (and sometimes a 'green industrial revolution') mirrors historic drives of investment and transformational change directed primarily at industry. These historical events assisted progress in many areas of public life, but also gave rise to gendered norms of the male worker-breadwinner and female housewife, both of which remain embedded to some extent in Western/Anglo-European culture. They were accompanied by adverse outcomes for women in both public and private spheres. The subsequent prioritisation of physical infrastructure and the side-lining or invisibility of social infrastructure is a continuation of male-centric orthodox economics. From a feminist perspective, it is essential to balance the emphasis on decarbonising the economy with the stated commitment to redressing social injustice, and this requires both awareness of and strategies for changing gender norms and stereotypes.



## 4.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

### **I. Embed feminist substantive equality goals at all stages and in all policy strands of a GND.**

- Build capacity for gender and intersectional analysis among economists, planners, decision makers and communicators through training and the co-creation of policy with the communities they affect.
- Rethink the gendered language and assumptions that underpin orthodox and green economics.
- Adopt policies for meaningful democratic participation outlined above.

## 4.5 RECOGNISING CARE

The most significant gap in existing policies is care: both paid work in the caring industries and unpaid caring and domestic labour. Some GND plans mention care superficially and others go as far as indicating a need to 'transform care' but do not say why or how. None of the plans recognise that paid and unpaid care work are an integral part of a transition to a green economy, and are, for the most part, already low carbon. The systemic lack of recognition and investment in social infrastructure has created industries in which small amounts of investment can create significant returns in both employment opportunities and service improvement. As previous research by the WBG has shown, the employment case for large scale investment in care is clear. [31] Any proposals to decarbonise and stimulate the economy through job creation must include investment in the caring industries.

It is entirely possible to create a post-carbon economy whilst simultaneously doing nothing to address the unfair division of social reproductive work between men and women. In order to address social inequality, plans for a GND need to explicitly focus on the gendered outcomes of any proposed policy. For example, in a city without cars, how will a GND address the increased time and labour now involved in shopping for a family? Who will wash the glasses and nappies when plastic no longer offers the convenience of disposables? Questions like these must be answered in a way that promotes gender equality rather than increasing women's share of work and responsibility.



Photo credit: From -  
Project "Green  
Fathers" organised by  
"MaminPapin"  
magazine with  
support of ANNA  
Centre.

## 4.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

### **J. Promote a culture shift towards valuing care as foundational to the economy, society and environmental sustainability.**

- Reframe and promote the caring industries and large portions of the service industry as green jobs.
- Support the caring industries to become greener through the promotion of sustainable buildings, low-impact equipment and cleaning materials, and strategies to reduce waste.
- Rebalance job creation in green technologies and infrastructure with investment in foundational low-carbon sectors. Labelling care, service, maintenance and stewardship as low-carbon activities would increase their social value, potentially making them more attractive to men. [32]

## 4.6 REDUCING THE SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL COSTS OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

The privatisation of care and other forms of social reproduction in individual households has not only been a driver of women's inequality, it is also resource intensive and wasteful. It is a feature of capitalism that, in rich countries like the UK, facilitates over-consumption, profit-oriented economic growth, environmental degradation and climate change.

GND plans currently do not make this connection, focussing instead on how to make private houses more energy efficient and how to get individuals to engage in sustainable practices such as water and energy conservation and waste recycling. There is no consideration of how everyday life practices could be made more resource efficient or how living spaces could be designed to maximise eco-efficiency at the same time as reducing the time required to carry them out. For example, old houses might be retrofitted with better insulation and new build housing might conform to Passivhaus [33] specifications, but the way living spaces are designed to lock in certain gendered patterns, practices and roles are not considered to be in need of change. Public transport might adopt electric or hydrogen-powered vehicles but fail to devise routes and schedules that serve people with variable work/care patterns requiring multiple short trips (to shops, schools, children's leisure activities, etc.) at different times in the day. While the transition to a decarbonised economy offers great potential to rethink a vast range of normalised features of daily life, insights from feminist architects, town planners and transport planners have not found their way into existing GND plans. [34]



## 4.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

### **K. Transform social and physical infrastructure to ensure social reproduction is equally shared and uses resources efficiently.**

- Enable collectivisation of unpaid care and domestic work through design in order to move away from 'caring as usual' as well as to reduce the material throughput involved. Better design will enable better service provision and mutual aid, thereby making care work less time consuming.
- Design new houses and flats with dedicated spaces for drying laundry and storing bulk goods and recyclables, providing communal gardens, kitchens and utility sheds for sharing tools, toys, appliances and work between neighbours.
- Promote, fund and facilitate co-housing developments, intentional communities and community land trusts in urban and rural areas, in order to co-locate carers, people requiring care (such as lone older women and people with disabilities) and amenities in close proximity.
- Ensure public transport schedules and routes are co-designed with users to provide a comprehensive service for those dependent on them.



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26. See for example Canada's [Leap Manifesto](#) and the US-based [Feminist Green New Deal](#).
27. <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Why-the-local-economy-is-important-for-gender-equality.pdf>
28. Community wealth building is a people-centred form of local economic development aimed at creating and retaining wealth locally whilst promoting economic democracy and agency. See: <https://cles.org.uk/community-wealth-building/what-is-community-wealth-building/>
29. Anchor institutions are large, place-based organisations that play a key role in their local economy. See: <https://cles.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Community-business-and-anchor-institutions-Digital.pdf>
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