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# Weaponizing women and gender: Party appeals to women voters ahead of the 2024 UK general election

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Whilst there are significant electoral advantages for political parties to target women's votes, scholarship on recent electoral appeals questions the quality of gendered policy promises to address deep structural gender inequalities existing within the British state. This article examines British Election Study data to identify women voters' concerns and explores how the two largest Westminster parties developed appeals to women voters in the build up to the 2024 UK general election through an analysis of leadership speeches to the 2023 party conferences. We find a disconnect between women's electoral demands to address class-based gender inequalities and party attempts to 'weaponize' the woman question around status issues. We conclude by pointing to the enduring nature of gendered inequalities despite the election of a Labour government, which targeted appeals more closely to the class-based concerns of women voters.

**Keywords:** gender; policy; elections; voting behaviour; party competition.

The 2024 general election saw a new Labour government take office. As the long campaign unfolded, appeals to women voters were prominent. Central to Labour Party strategy was the 'Stevenage Woman'—a key voter demographic identified by Labour Together, who, 'above all others, holds the keys to Downing Street' (Simons *et al.*, 2023: 6) and would be 'vital to Labour success' (Savage 2023). Meanwhile, for the Conservatives, the 'Whitby woman' was identified as a voter group who could drift from previous Conservative support (McKeon 2024). While the 'Stevenage

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Woman’ resided in suburban areas—often marginal constituencies—and the ‘Whitby Woman’ was described as a floating voter, it was clear that women’s votes could play an important role in the election outcome.

Parties’ use of fictionalized voter segments to target the women electorate are not new. Previous elections have seen the ‘Worcester Woman’, ‘School gate mums’, and even the ‘Take a Break Woman’ enter the political lexicon (Mattinson 2000; Harmer and Wring 2013). These appeals increasingly reflect the diversity of women voters and the increasing foregrounding of women and gender by political parties. For Labour, the party was vocal on its focus on ‘mid-life women’ (Elgot 2023). And for the Conservatives, the party emphasized cultural issues especially around sex/gender, reflected in the Prime Minister’s comment that ‘a man is a man, and a woman is a woman’ (Gutteridge 2023). It is here in particular that the concept of ‘weaponizing’ becomes apparent. We define ‘weaponizing’ as the politicization of an issue for political gain, namely the ‘othering’ of a minoritized group. The term ‘weaponizing’ is commonly applied in the context of right-wing populist parties and the strategies they use to politicize gender (Farris 2017; Mugge and de Jong 2013; Siim 2014). By promoting policies such as tackling female genital mutilation and forced marriage, right-wing populist parties appear to be advocating for women’s rights, but at the same time, tap into broader public concerns about immigration, thereby ‘othering’ immigrant communities and ethnic minorities more broadly. As Siim (2014: 120) argues, gender equality is ‘used by both mainstream political organizations and right-wing antimigration forces as a tool of demarcation between “us and them”, the gender-equal majority and oppressed Muslim women.’ We extend this observation of parties weaponizing gender in order to ‘other’ immigrant and ethnic minority communities, to illustrate the ‘othering’ of trans people. In this sense, appeals to women (such as those relating to gender self-identification) are exploited to exclude those who may not conform to (cis)gender norms—a strategy which, in turn, reinforces structured inequalities in British politics and society.

Structured inequalities can be viewed through the Asymmetric Power Model (APM), adopted by Marsh, Richards, & Smith (2003). The APM identified the importance of structured inequality in shaping British political institutions, processes and, indeed, personnel and called for more research on this dynamic. Despite this, there remains insufficient focus on the gendered aspect of the model within the operation of the British central state. Gendered structured inequalities are deeply entrenched within the structure of British society; they are ubiquitous and permeate across multiple policy areas.

Gendered inequalities can be categorized into two broad categories. Firstly, women experience gendered economic inequalities, which stem from the sexual division of labour. In Britain, women undertake a greater proportion of care work relative to men: on average, nearly half of working-age women provide 45 hours of

unpaid care per week, while 25% of men provide 17 hours ([Centre for Progressive Policy 2022](#)). This disproportionate share of unpaid care undertaken by women affects their ability to enter, or return to, the labour market, thus affecting their career progression and financial security. It is estimated that up to 1.7 million women are prevented from taking on more hours due to childcare issues ([Centre for Progressive Policy 2021](#)). And, more widely, the gender pay gap—although declining over time—currently stands at 7.7% among full-time employees ([ONS 2023](#)). The disproportionate share of care also has a delayed impact on the financial security of women in later life.

While these injustices affect women to a greater extent than men overall, not all women will experience these injustices equally: rather, their impact varies across intersectional lines, such as class. For example, women on higher incomes can afford to outsource childcare to the private sector in ways that lower-income women cannot. Additionally, higher-income women are also more likely to be able to access private healthcare compared to lower-income women. Class-based inequalities among women also intersect with other forms of structural disadvantage; for example, women of colour are more likely to be concentrated in lower-income households ([Women's Budget Group 2017](#)).

Secondly, women also experience gender-based forms of discrimination and status subordination, including domestic violence, sexual assault, objectification, disparagement in everyday life, exclusion from public and deliberative institutions, and fewer rights and protections of citizenship ([Fraser 2003](#)). In England and Wales, over one in four women will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime, and 20% of women and 4% of men have suffered sexual assault since the age of 16 ([ONS 2018](#); [Women's Budget Group 2022a](#)).

In recent elections, political parties in Britain have increasingly attempted to target women voters through policy appeals to address these gendered structured inequalities. And parties do so with good reason: women comprise the 51% of the UK population but an even greater proportion of the electorate. This is partly due to demographic differences. Due to men's higher mortality rates, women tend to outnumber men at the older ages: among those aged over 85, 65% are women ([ONS, 2016](#)). This difference may have an even more profound impact on election outcomes since those in older age groups have higher turnout rates than those in younger age groups ([Smets 2012](#); [Chrisp and Pearce 2019](#)). Additionally, women are more likely than men to be 'floating voters', deciding their vote choice much closer to the election date than men ([Campbell and Shorrocks 2021a](#); [Shorrocks and Sanders 2024](#)). There is therefore a significant electoral advantage in targeting women voters during election campaigns. Given this foregrounding of women and gender, and increased party competition around women's votes, we ask: how did parties appeal to women in the run-up to the 2024 general election?

We firstly review the literature around gendered voting patterns and the way in which parties in the UK have developed their gendered policy promises. We then examine how well the parties are responding to the diverse and changing demands of women voters in the long campaign ahead of the 2024 general election. To identify the issues of importance to women and the policy agendas therefore likely to influence women's political demands and vote choice, we examine Wave 25 of the British Election Study Internet Panel (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2023). We then analyse party leadership speeches to examine how the two national mainstream parties are framing their appeals and competing for women's votes in the run-up to the 2024 general election. In essence, we examine what women want, and then assess the extent to which parties strategized to address these demands.

In concluding, we highlight the continuing gender inequalities evident in the APM of the British state and the key electoral demands from women voters to address these gendered inequalities. We argue that appeals to 'class-based' gendered inequalities are likely to be more successful in attracting women's votes than weaponizing voters around some 'status' issues. We caution that party appeals to address gendered inequalities are impacted by fiscal constraints and face additional dilemmas in setting out their policy promises due to the fragmentation of the British state as policy-making responsibilities are devolved. The asymmetrical nature of the British state is unlikely to be challenged despite the electoral competition for winning women's votes in the run-up to the next election. This analysis of how party leaders campaigned to win women's votes and electoral promises addressing the inequalities of the British State is of empirical relevance to understanding the electoral battlegrounds in the run-up to the 2024 general election and contributes to the developing analytical literature on party appeals and gendered voting behaviour.

## 1. Women's voting behaviour and gendered party appeals

Historically, women in Britain have been more likely than men to vote for the Conservative Party, whilst men have been more likely to vote Labour—a phenomenon known as the 'traditional gender gap'. Women voters formed a key base of Conservative support—so much so, that 'had women never been granted the right to vote in 1918, the outcome of an all-male electorate would have led to a Labour victory in every British general election between 1945 and 1997' (Mattinson 2014: 247). This traditional gender gap was not unique to the British context, and was prominent across most European countries after the Second World War (Inglehart and Norris 2003). Over time, however, differences in men and women's voting behaviour have narrowed, and whilst most European countries began to display a 'modern gender gap'—in which women were to the left of men in their voting behaviour—this trend took place much later in Britain. In fact, it was not

until 2017 that a modern gender gap in Britain emerged at the aggregate level (Campbell and Shorrocks 2021a).

Differences in men and women's voting behaviour are often thought to be the product of gender differences in lived experience and socialization, rather than a result of innate gender differences (Campbell and Shorrocks 2021a). Existing accounts of women's voting behaviour have tended to emphasize long-term, socioeconomic change when explaining women's greater propensity to vote for left-wing parties. Over time, women have entered the labour market and higher education in greater numbers. As women have gradually shifted from the unpaid domestic sphere and into the paid public sphere, existing literature has found they have been more likely to lean left as a result of becoming unionized (Manza and Brooks 1998; Studlar et al., 1998), developing greater economic independence (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Lin 2004; Giger 2009), and being exposed to gender inequality in the workplace (Klein, 1984). This change in women's labour force patterns has been coupled with fewer women having children and declining rates of marriage over time, leading to women's greater propensity to support left-wing parties. This trend is partly due to financial differences, where single women—including divorcees—tend to have lower incomes relative to married women, leading them to become more supportive of parties on the left (Edlund and Pande 2002). Inglehart & Norris (2003) suggest that women who are married and those with children will also have different lifestyles compared to those who are divorced or single, which may influence their views about women's roles in the family. Finally, religiosity—which is typically associated with voting for centre-right parties—has witnessed a gradual decline especially among women, who were traditionally more religious than men (Emmenegger and Manow 2014). These socioeconomic trends may partly explain *gender-age* differences in vote choice, with younger generations being more likely to display a 'modern gender gap', whilst a 'traditional gender gap' persists among older generations (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

Recent literature, however, has suggested that whilst socioeconomic factors may partly account for the decline of the traditional gender gap, contextual factors—notably policy offers from parties and the economic context—can play a crucial role in contributing to gender gaps in vote choice. The 2015 and 2017 general elections, for instance, showed clear differences in economic pledges between the Conservatives and Labour. Analysis of the 2015 and 2017 elections found that younger women were more concerned than their male counterparts and older women about their living costs, their household finances and the economy (Sanders and Shorrocks, 2019). This economic and financial pessimism exhibited by younger women was associated with their higher relative support for Labour and lower support for the Conservatives (Sanders and Shorrocks 2019). Meanwhile, research on the 2019 election has shown that Brexit played a crucial

role in exacerbating gender-age differences in voting behaviour (Campbell and Shorrocks 2021b). Notably, younger women's support for Remain in the 2016 EU Referendum was found to be driving their higher relative support for Labour (Campbell and Shorrocks 2021b). Such events may partly explain why a modern gender gap occurred much later in Britain, compared to other European countries. Taken together, this body of literature suggests that policy pledges from parties can play a crucial role in shaping gender gaps in voting behaviour.

The decline of the traditional gender gap and realignment of women voters—as well as increased volatility among the electorate more widely—implies that a greater number of women's votes are now 'up for grabs'. As parties have become more cognizant of women voters, they have started to increasingly compete for their votes (Childs, 2008; Campbell and Childs 2015a; Sanders, Gains, and Annesley 2021). Many calls to appeal to women voters have come from feminist politicians within political parties (Campbell and Childs 2015a; Campbell and Shorrocks 2021a). Research has shown that since 2015, most Westminster parties have increased the quantity and diversity of their appeals to women voters (Sanders, Gains, and Annesley 2021). However, this increase in party appeals has not been evident among all parties, where the number of appeals from the Conservative Party to women has declined since 2015. Moreover, some groups of women—notably women of colour, women with disabilities, and low-income women—remain underrepresented in policy pledges (Sanders, Gains, and Annesley 2021).

When analysing gendered policy pledges from parties, particular attention has been paid to the *type* of appeal to women voters (Annesley and Gains 2013; Annesley, Engeli, and Gains 2015; Htun and Weldon 2018; Sanders *et al.*, 2021; Belknap and Kenny 2023). Examining the type of policy appeal to women is important to not only understand what type of gender (in)equality is being addressed, but the quality of policy pledges more broadly. As such, we draw on Htun & Weldon's (2010, 2018) typology of gender equality policy, which classifies gendered policies into those that are primarily addressing 'class-based' and 'status' inequalities.

*Class-based* policies seek to ameliorate the inequalities that women face as a result of the labour market. In addressing these injustices, they aim to shift women out of the private domestic sphere and instead towards the paid labour market. Class-based policies may include those relating to childcare, pensions, or family welfare. *Status* policies are those that seek to address the injustices and discrimination that women face by virtue of their gender. These types of policies may include those that address women's descriptive underrepresentation (such as gender quotas), or policies that tackle violence against women. In practice, the gender inequalities arising from class-based and status issues are interconnected. But in categorizing the primary policy intention into addressing class-based or status

issues, [Htun & Weldon's \(2010, 2018\)](#) gender equality policy framework has been used to link and develop the analysis of public policy scholarship with the party and election literature and is operationalized to analyse party pledges to women voters in research elsewhere ([Annesley, Engeli, and Gains 2015](#); [Sanders et al., 2021](#); [Belknap and Kenny 2023](#)). Here, we extend this growing body of literature and apply it to an understudied case—the 2024 general election.

The gendered analysis of manifestos has also widened in scope to examine party appeals in devolved elections (see [Belknap and Kenny 2023](#)). In their analysis of the 2011, 2016, and 2021 Scottish parliamentary elections, [Belknap & Kenny \(2023\)](#) find that Scottish parties have increased the quantity and diversity of manifesto appeals to women. However, they demonstrate that progress in appealing to women voters has not been even among all parties ([Belknap and Kenny 2023](#)).

An examination of the manifesto promises of Scottish parties highlights that many policy agendas of relevance to women voters are devolved to the national parliaments and the policy levers to address these issues are not within the direct control of the central state. These include issues pertaining to health and social care, childcare, and housing. Although many gendered policy agendas have now become devolved, central government still retains control over the resourcing of devolved institutions as well as the boundaries of their authority. This governing landscape reflects a partial hollowing out of the state, reflected in the APM. According to the APM, there is a mutual dependence between government and other actors (such as those at the local level, subnational level, and private sector) to deliver public services across a range of issues ([Marsh, Richards, and Smith 2003](#)). However, the power dynamic of this relationship is asymmetric since control over resourcing ultimately resides with central government. This complicated the strategies the two main political parties could adopt in the run-up to the 2024 election. Clear messages about what is on offer in effect might only be applicable to England, yet the two main parties largely operate from a centralized policy platform.

## 2. Methodology

Our analysis is split into two parts. Firstly, we examine what women want (i.e., their policy preferences). Secondly, we examine what parties are offering women voters. To examine women's policy preferences, we draw on the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) (Wave 25) ([Fieldhouse et al., 2023](#)). The BESIP asks a wave of respondents about their most important issue (MII) facing the country at the next general election, which allows us to examine women's policy priorities and how they differ from men's. We pay particular attention to whether the issues women prioritize are class-based or those based on status issues. We then

undertake a qualitative analysis, exploring what the main Westminster parties were offering women in the long campaign ahead of the 2024 general election.

Recent scholarship exploring how the main UK parties have sought to appeal to women voters has examined the diversity and quality of manifesto appeals (Annesley and Gains 2015, 2017; Sanders, Annesley, and Gains 2019; Sanders, Gains, and Annesley 2021; Belknap and Kenny 2023). These analyses highlight key differences in policy domains and the types of policy appeal; the diversity of women's demands; and that the quality of the policy promises made are important to note as this is related to the likelihood of manifesto promises made to result in actual policy change and implementation.

Party manifestos were not available until June 2024. However, we identify a comparative empirical source that can point to the broader policy platforms each of the two main parties drew from to compile their manifesto and the way in which key elite actors in both Government and opposition articulated and framed appeals to women voters. The empirical sources we examined consisted of 12 speeches made by the key cabinet ministers in the Conservative government and the matching Labour Opposition portfolio holders at the relevant party conferences.<sup>1</sup> Transcripts of the speeches made by Conservative ministers were available on the main Conservative Party website, and those made by Labour shadow ministers were available via the Party's news website, *LabourList*. The 2023 conference season was the last opportunity for the parties to set out their agendas and make appeals directly to the public before the manifestos were published. We therefore examined speeches from the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition; the Chancellor and Shadow Chancellor; the Home Secretary and Shadow Home Secretary; the Justice Minister and Shadow Justice Minister; the Secretary and Shadow Secretaries of State for Education, Science Industry and Technology, and Business and Trade. Additionally, we examined the Minister and Shadow Minister holding the Equalities brief, held by the Business and Industry Secretary's portfolio in the Government and the Shadow Leader of the House for Labour.

Drawing on methodologies adopted in recent analyses of gendered appeals in manifesto documents (Sanders *et al.*, 2021; Belknap and Kenny 2023), we examined the speeches for policy promises which either included mention of key words ('women', 'girls', 'gender') or offered policy promises on policy agendas primarily affecting women's gendered inequalities both in the labour market (e.g. care work, childcare) or arising from women's status as women (e.g. sexual crimes). In our analysis to assess the quality of the policy promises, we place a focus on the way

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<sup>1</sup>We triangulated the speeches against party manifestos once they were published. All pledges within party speeches featured in parties' manifestos, with one exception (Labour's pledge to enforce political parties to publish diversity data on their candidates).

in which the tools of government are distributed across the four national governments and to devolved mayoral combined authorities in England to reflect on the way in which the APM impacts the policy promised to attract women voters ahead of the next election.

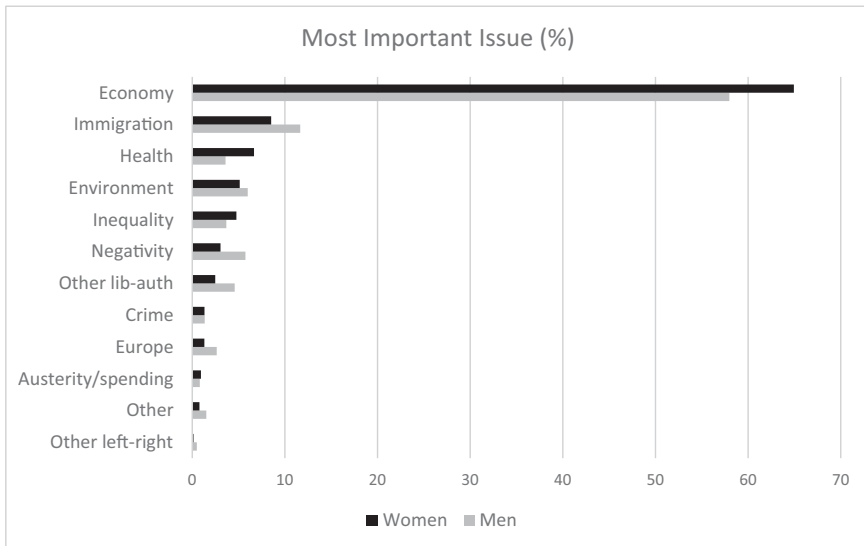
Our analysis focuses on gendered appeals among the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. There are of course limitations in solely analysing the two largest national parties. Notably, smaller parties, such as the Liberal Democrats, the SNP, or the Green Party, may offer policies that have their own appeal to women voters. However, we focus here on the Conservative and Labour parties as this is where competition for women's votes has been most intense, given the gradual shift in women's vote choice at the aggregate level from Conservative to Labour. Given recent research emphasizing the importance of policies on offer (Sanders and Shorrocks 2019; [Campbell and Shorrocks 2021b](#)), this trend in women's voting behaviour may partly be explained by the policies on offer from these parties. As the two largest parties, it was also highly likely that Labour or the Conservatives would form the next government due to the nature of the UK's majoritarian electoral system.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. What women want

To explore women's policy preferences, we drew on Wave 25 of the British Election Study Internet Panel (conducted February–May 2023) ([Fieldhouse et al., 2023](#)). We draw on data from Wave 25 specifically because it was conducted nearest to the timing of the party conference speeches, and because it contains all our variables of interest—such as prospective economic evaluations and prospective household financial evaluations—which are not included in the latest wave.

[Figure 1](#) shows what respondents consider to be the MII facing the country, by gender. The question is based on an open-ended format, where respondents were able to write in what they perceive to be the MII facing the country at the present time. Responses were then coded into broad issue areas. Previous research on gender gaps in issue salience has shown that, traditionally, men were more likely than women to select the economy as their MII, while women were more likely than men to select health ([Campbell 2006, 2012](#)). Interestingly, the gender gap on the salience of the economy has reversed since 2022, with women now being more likely than men to select the economy as their MII—possibly as a result of the cost-of-living crisis. [Figure 1](#) shows that a significant proportion of women consider the economy to be the MII facing the country, selected by around two-thirds of women (64.9%). The economy—broadly defined—may include issues pertaining to inflation, living costs, the national economy, or more specific issues



**Figure 1.** The most important issue facing the country. Source: British Election Study Internet Panel, Wave 25, May 2023.  $N = 27,747$ . Data are weighted according to standard weights.

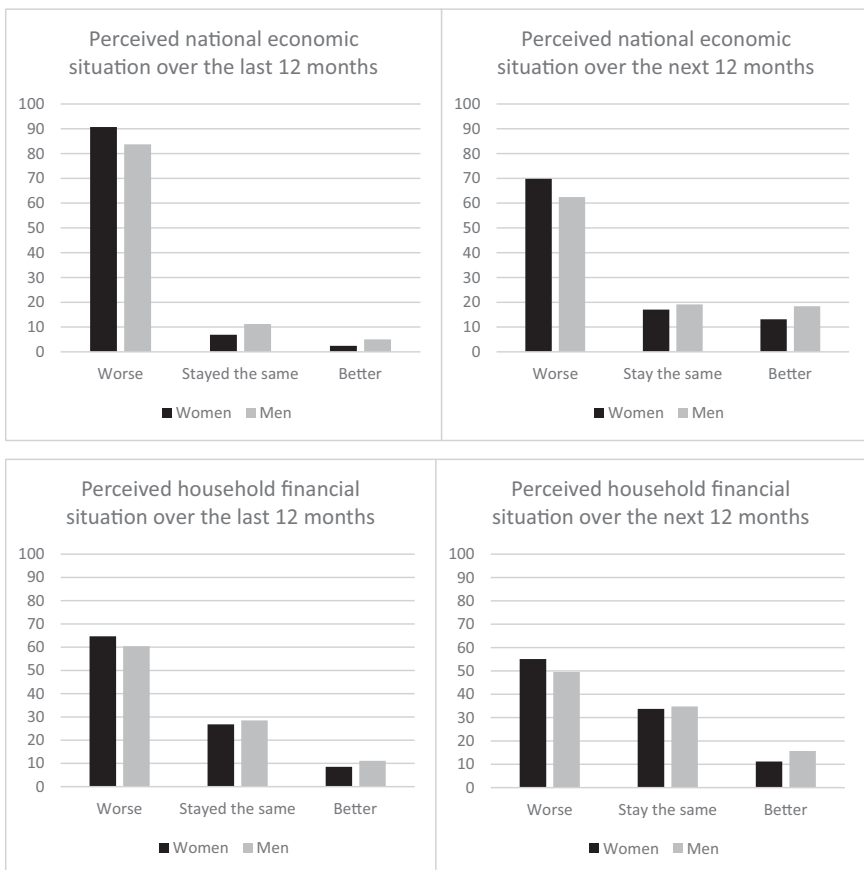
such as affording childcare. While the economy also comes out on top as men's MII, men are six percentage points less likely to select the economy compared to women. This is followed by immigration (8.8%) and health (6.7%). Taken together, this suggests that class-based issues, notably the economy and health, are heavily prioritized by women in comparison to status issues, such as violence against women and girls, equality and diversity of representation, and other rights relating to women's bodily integrity. These status issues may fall under the 'inequality' category (selected by 4.8% of women), for example, which includes the issue of discrimination. Alternatively, they may fall under 'crime' (selected by 1.3% of women), which incorporates the issue of violence against women and girls.<sup>2</sup> It is also notable that a small proportion of women list transgender issues as their MII, which falls within the 'other liberal-authoritarian' category (selected by 2.5% of women).

The reversed gender gap on the salience of the economy may be explained by the cost-of-living crisis, which has hit women disproportionately harder than men (Women's Budget Group 2022b). This is partly because women tend to be

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that there is some overlap between the MII categories. For example, a response such as 'funding for domestic abuse services' is coded as 'crime', despite including an economic aspect. Therefore, whilst MII categories provide a useful point of comparison between policy issues, distinctions between each policy area should be treated with caution given the overlapping nature of policy areas.

disproportionately concentrated in the poorest households, and partly because the impact of the cost-of-living crisis has been regressive (Women’s Budget Group 2022b). As such, women are more likely to feel the rising costs of food, childcare, and energy more acutely. Women’s greater concern over the economy can be seen in Fig. 2, which shows respondents’ evaluations of the national economic situation (over the last 12 months and over the next 12 months), and perceptions of respondents’ household financial situation (over the last 12 months and over the next 12 months).

While the majority of all respondents are pessimistic about the national economic situation and their personal household finances, women display greater economic and financial pessimism than men, as shown in Fig. 2. Figure 2 shows that women are more likely than men to think that the national economic situation



**Figure 2.** National economic evaluations and household financial evaluations.  $N = 14,117-15,197$ . Data are weighted according to standard weights.

has worsened over the last 12 months, and that it will worsen over the next 12 months. At the same time, women are more likely than men to think that their household financial situation has worsened over the last 12 months, and that it will worsen over the next 12 months. Again, this economic and financial pessimism—especially among women—is likely being driven by the cost-of-living crisis that has had disproportionately gendered effects. The gendered impact of the cost-of-living crisis highlights the APM's feature of structured inequality—in particular, inequality that women face in relation to the economy. The regressive nature of the cost-of-living crisis reinforces class-based inequalities between women. The cost-of-living crisis not only exacerbates gender inequalities in British society, but exacerbates inequalities based on class. The gender gap in selecting the economy as the MII is to some extent unsurprising, given women's greater economic and financial pessimism. We might therefore expect the economy, and broader class-based concerns, to feature as a core tenet of party pledges to women.

When asked which party respondents feel is best able to lead on their MII, women are less likely than men to name a party. Around 26.7% of women say that they 'don't know' which party is best to lead on their MII, compared to 15.6% of men. Women's lower propensity to name a party on their MII has been documented elsewhere (Shorrocks and Sanders 2024). Women are also slightly more likely than men to say that no party is best on their MII (31% of women vs 28.9%). Taken together, this may suggest that women feel less represented than men by political parties and the policies they have on offer. Additionally, women's greater propensity to be undecided on which party is best able to deliver on their MII and their greater propensity to decide their vote choice later than men's suggests that election campaigns will be especially important in influencing their vote choice. We now turn to examining party appeals to women voters in the run-up to the 2024 general election.

### 3.2. Analysis of party speeches

3.2.1 Use of personal stories to appeal to a diversity of women. Across the party speeches, there was a frequent use of personal stories to appeal to women in their diversity. Personal stories are used to frame and foreground party appeals on issues that may have particular resonance with women voters. For example, the cost-of-living crisis was framed through a gendered lens. For instance, Labour Party Leader, Keir Starmer, spoke about the difficulties a single mother faced around the cost-of-living crisis:

And what one woman said, really stuck in my mind. She was a single Mum, two kids. And she said to me: 'It's survival mode. I can't think oh let's do something nice. There's no long-term planning. No thinking

about the future.' I could see the hurt in her eyes as she told me. That's what this cost-of-living crisis does. It intrudes on the things we love. (Keir Starmer, Labour Party Leader)

This framing of the cost-of-living crisis as a gendered issue was echoed by Rachel Reeves, Shadow Chancellor:

When you play fast and loose with public finances, you put at risk family finances. Like the mum I met in Scarborough earlier this year... who had moved back home with her mum for five years... to save for a deposit to buy a home of her own. Only to find... that the mortgage costs she would face had outstripped her income. (Rachel Reeves, Shadow Chancellor)

Elsewhere, the Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, also retold a personal story on the issue of violence against women and girls:

[E]very one of us in this hall will have stories from friends, families or neighbours about the violence and abuse that too many women face. My great, great grandmother was attacked by her husband... Conference we cannot stand by and let our daughters face the same abuse as our grandmothers. (Yvette Cooper, Shadow Home Secretary)

The use of personal stories was evident among both parties. For example, both the Conservative Education Secretary and the Conservative Business Secretary associated the issue of employment with the concept of motherhood. Notably, the Education Secretary framed work/life balance as a woman's issue:

In my business life, I've seen woman after woman have to choose between their career and having a family – and usually their career lost. (Gillian Keegan, Education Secretary)  
My 6-year-old asked me, 'Mummy, what's a Business Secretary? What does that mean?' I told him, it means everything is my business. (Kemi Badenoch, Business Secretary)

While personal stories are used by both parties, they are slightly more likely to be used by the Labour women (shadow) ministers. In total, gendered personal stories are used by seven (shadow) ministers: three from the Conservative Party, and four from Labour. Of these seven ministers, five are women, and two are men. Although based on a small sample, this suggests a possible link between the descriptive representation of women (the physical presence of women representatives) and their substantive representation (the representation of women's interests) (Pitkin 1967). Research has found that in the Netherlands, personal stories are more likely to be

used by ethnic minority MPs to counter stereotypes and demonstrate shared values (Mugge and Runderkamp 2023). As Mugge & Runderkamp (2023: 4) expand, 'Narratives make identities visible in politics. Narratives can explain values and ideals, advance representative claims, and can also—or especially—be used for political purposes.'

Overall, this use of personal appeals suggests that it is not only what parties are pledging to women voters that is important but also the way that they are being framed and foregrounded. The use of personal stories is not unique to the context of the 2024 general election. However, it is evident that there is a notable increase in the quantity of personal appeals compared to previous elections, especially those that are framed in a gendered way. A comparison with 2019 party leaders' speeches shows just one personal story used by the then Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn (in reference to affordability for drugs in the NHS), and no personal stories in Boris Johnson's speech. This 'gendering' of party speeches and framing of policy appeals reflects an increased recognition among parties to appeal to women voters in their campaigns.

Next, we examine the specific policy promises addressing women voters made in the 12 speeches made by government and shadow cabinet ministers at the 2023 Conservative Party and Labour Party conferences. Table 1 presents Conservative Party promises, and Table 2 presents promises from the Labour Party. In each table, we identify whether the promise addresses class-based or status inequalities, and by which portfolio holder the appeal is mentioned.

### 3.3. Class-based issues

*3.3.1 Childcare as a key battleground.* Of the class-based policies on offer, childcare emerged as a key battleground, with both parties making competitive pledges on this policy issue. As it stands, the UK has one of the most expensive childcare systems of any OECD country (OECD 2023). Women undertake the majority of unpaid childcare, and therefore a lack of flexibility and affordability in childcare provision hinders women's (re-)entrance to, and progression within, the labour market. A recent survey conducted by Mumsnet (2021) showed that two-thirds of women reduced their working hours since becoming a parent, compared to 26% of men. Addressing such issues could have electoral payoffs for parties. According to evidence from the Fawcett Society (2023), three-quarters of women in marginal constituencies said that affordable childcare is important when considering which party to vote for, again highlighting the importance of economic concerns more widely.

From the Conservatives, the main pledge was the introduction of 30 hours of free childcare for working parents of children aged 9 months up to 3 years in England, due to be rolled out in stages from April 2024. Although the pledge was not new, and was in

**Table 1.** Policy promises for women voters: Conservative Party Conference Leadership Speeches 2023

Policy type	Policy promise	Source
Class-based	30 hours free childcare	Secretary of State for Education <sup>a</sup>
	Social care workforce expansion	Prime Minister <sup>b</sup>
Status	Legislation regarding sexual crimes	The Prime Minister Home Secretary <sup>c</sup>
	Qualifying trans rights	The Prime Minister Home Secretary Secretary of State for Education Health Secretary <sup>d</sup> Secretary of State for Women and Equalities <sup>e</sup>
	Improving maternal health and outcomes	The Prime Minister
	Scaling back diversity and equality initiatives	Chancellor Home Secretary Health Secretary
	Maternal health improvement via smoking restrictions	Prime Minister

<sup>a</sup>Keegan (2023).

<sup>b</sup>Sunak (2023).

<sup>c</sup>Braverman (2023).

<sup>d</sup>Barclay (2023).

<sup>e</sup>Badenoch (2023).

fact first announced by the Chancellor in the 2023 Spring budget, it marked a significant expansion of free childcare, which the Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan, called ‘the most comprehensive and generous childcare package in our country’s history’. Under the previous system, working parents were entitled to 30 hours of free childcare for children from the age of 3, meaning that the childcare system left a large gap in between parental leave and subsidized childcare provision. In the Spring budget, the Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, claimed that the expansion of free childcare was worth on average £6,500 per year for a family with a 2-year-old child using 35 hours of childcare, thus reducing their childcare costs by nearly 60%.<sup>3</sup> This expansion, Hunt announced, would be funded through approximately £4.1bn for the Early Years sector by 2027–28 (HM Treasury 2023: 54).

While the Conservative pledge to expand free childcare has been largely welcomed by feminist think tanks and organizations, they have also raised concerns

<sup>3</sup>Hunt (2023), Spring Budget 2023 Speech, *gov.uk*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/spring-budget-2023-speech>.

**Table 2.** Policy promises for women voters: Labour Party Conference Leadership Speeches 2023

Policy type	Policy promise	Source
Class-based	Review gender pay gap	Shadow Chancellor <sup>a</sup> Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities <sup>b</sup>
	A new deal for care workers	Shadow Health Secretary <sup>c</sup>
	Expansion of the health workforce including midwives	Shadow Health Secretary
	Free breakfast clubs in primary schools	Shadow Health Secretary Shadow Secretary of State for Education <sup>d</sup>
	Support for women experiencing the menopause	Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities
	Enshrining the single source test	Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities
	Measures to tackle maternal mortality and health disparities	Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities
Status	Rape investigation units in every force	Shadow Home Secretary <sup>e</sup>
	Domestic abuse experts in every 999 call centre	Shadow Home Secretary
	Requirement for political parties to publish diversity data	Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities
	Halve serious violent crime	Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities
	Defence of the Equality Act	Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities
	Stronger sentencing for those committing LGBT + hate crimes	Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities
	Trans-inclusive ban on conversion therapy	Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities

<sup>a</sup>Reeves (2023).<sup>b</sup>Dodds (2023).<sup>c</sup>Streeting (2023).<sup>d</sup>Phillipson (2023).<sup>e</sup>Cooper (2023).

over the effectiveness of the policy (Fawcett Society 2023; Women's Budget Group 2023a). Firstly, the offer is only available to working parents: to qualify, children with both parents (or a lone parent) must be working at least 16 hours at the minimum wage per week. Restricting eligibility to working parents risks reinforcing existing inequalities (Stewart 2023)—not only between women and men (since women are less likely to be in paid employment)—but between women who are in paid employment, and those who are not. There are also considerable shortfalls in funding. The proposed investment of £4bn sits against a backdrop of austerity

measures and reductions to local authority funding for early years since 2010. Between 2014/15 and 2017/18, spending on children's centres fell by 33%, from £835m to £560m ([Women's Budget Group 2023b](#)). The financial challenges faced by early years providers have been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, illustrated by the closure of over 5,400 early years providers between 2021 and 2022 ([Ofsted, 2022](#)). To make up for lost income, early years providers often cross-subsidize free places by charging parents additional fees for lunches or other items ([Stewart 2023](#)). In examining the Conservatives' 30-hour pledge, two themes become apparent. The first is that of inequality, where women are hit disproportionately harder by economic challenges, such as affording childcare. The second theme is based on instability. The Conservatives' childcare offering is dealing with problems created by the earlier abolition of other initiatives—notably countering the shortfall in childcare funding driven, in part, by austerity policy.

Labour's childcare pledges included launching a review into the Early Years sector as well as removing restrictions on local authorities delivering childcare. Yet perhaps the most competitive announcement was the pledge to fund universal breakfast clubs for all primary schools in England. This would be implemented at a cost of £365m per year, and would be funded by reinstating the top level of income tax. The pledge—although not new, and had in fact been announced by the Shadow Education Secretary 12 months earlier—was largely welcomed by children's charities as a 'cost-effective solution' ([Wood 2022](#)), given the policy's provision of food as well as wraparound childcare.

While Labour made a competitive pledge around funding breakfast clubs, it is notable that the Party stopped short of offering a pledge on universal childcare, which departs from the approach the party had previously taken at the 2017 and 2019 elections. The absence of universal childcare reflects the party's aim to present itself as fiscally prudent and restore economic credibility among voters. This was reflected in Starmer's comment in December 2023 that a Labour government 'won't turn on spending taps' ([Stacey and Crerar 2023](#)).

Other notable differences on class-based policies relate to employment. For Labour, the party pledged to support women experiencing menopause, to tackle the gender pay gap and to support businesses led by women. Additionally, the party pledged to enshrine the 'single source test' in UK legislation—an EU law allowing employees to compare their salaries to those performing the same roles in other locations. Other than the issue of childcare, there are few class-based appeals from the Conservatives that directly target women voters.

### 3.4. Status issues

3.4.1 *Difference in detail.* Finally, we turn to analysing policy appeals addressing status issues within party speeches. Of particular note are detailed policy

appeals from Labour around tackling violence against women. These include placing rape investigation units in every police force and placing domestic abuse specialists in every 999 call centre. However, policing in Scotland is not a reserved matter and in England and Wales responsibility for setting policing priorities rests with directly elected Police and Crime Commissioner (PCCs). It is therefore a pledge which, although made by the Shadow Home Secretary, would require implementing via devolved arrangements and independently elected representatives. Research examining the introduction of directly elected PCCs showed that despite the then Home Secretary Theresa May's national prioritization of violence against women and girls policies, the extent to which PCCs responded and prioritized VAWG varied greatly (Gains and Lowndes 2014). This dependence on other actors with independent and political legitimacy poses challenges for central government to 'steer' and thus deliver on policy pledges (see Marsh, Richards, and Smith 2003).

For the Conservatives, the main concrete pledge from the party was legislation on sexual crimes, where those found guilty will face a life term. Yet there was relatively little detail from the Conservative Home Secretary on issues pertaining to tackling violence against women. Where links to violence against women were made, this was mostly associated with addressing the question of trans rights:

We will bring forward legislation to prevent registered sex offenders from changing their identities, and we will work to strengthen background checks so that they can catch undisclosed changes of identity. (Suella Braverman, Home Secretary)

3.4.2 Conservative attack on 'wokery'. For the Conservatives, the speeches point to a clear cross-portfolio attack on 'wokery', with the party emphasizing conservative values in relation to issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion. For example, in discussing approaches to EDI and pledging a policy to freeze the expansion of the civil service, there was opposition from the Chancellor to collecting diversity data:

That means, amongst other things, changing our approach to equality and diversity initiatives. Smashing glass ceilings is everyone's job—not a box to be ticked by hiring a diversity manager. (Jeremy Hunt, Chancellor)

Yet it is the issue of trans rights on which the Conservatives are particularly vocal, raising the issue of gender self-identification and how women should be defined. It is here that the issue of sex/gender comes to the fore. Embedded in these narratives were appeals to 'common sense':

Patients should know when hospitals are talking about men or women. And we shouldn't get bullied into believing that people can be any sex they want to be. They can't; a man is a man and a woman is a woman. That's just common sense. (Rishi Sunak, Conservative Party Leader)

It's common sense to be able to say that parents should be able to see what their children are being taught in schools. It's common sense that girls should have separate toilets from boys. (Gillian Keegan, Education Secretary)

The issue of trans rights and tensions between 'trans inclusive' and 'gender critical' perspectives has also been a divisive and turbulent debate in public and internal Labour Party policy discussions. Given these internal divisions, the Party has sought to minimize rather than weaponize, and downplay the issue of gender self-identification. The Party's Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities later announced a position statement which made clear support for sex and gender to be seen as protected categories under the Equalities Act, stating 'Labour's commitment to trans people and women is not up for debate'. This policy position was agreed during policy debates at the Party's Conference and the leaders' speeches do not question the premise of the Equalities Act in respect of sex and gender.

The Conservatives' focus on trans rights 'weaponizes' the issue of gender by seeking to appeal to women voters through the exclusion of others (in this case, members of the trans community). In many ways, this strategy uses women's rights as a trojan horse to attack minorities. In previous elections, however, it has been immigrants and ethnic minorities who have been the subject of attack—for example, the Coalition's policies on forced marriage and female genital mutilation were viewed as marrying with 'wider concerns and popular concerns about immigration, multiculturalism, and "British" values' (Campbell and Childs 2015b: 407). We question the extent to which Conservative policies weaponizing the issue of gender would be likely to resonate with many women voters in the 2024 election, given the lack of salience around status issues such as violence against women and girls, and prominence of other, notably economic, issues.

#### 4. Findings and conclusion

How do policy promises currently shape up to the policy and issue concerns of women? The quantitative analysis of women's policy priorities suggests pledges addressing class-based gendered inequalities, such as on the economy and health, were more likely to be prioritized by women voters than pledges to women around some status issues.

The analysis of speeches given in the build up to the 2024 election suggested a far more constrained appeal to women voters, particularly from the Conservatives, both in terms of the number and range of policy promises and in the appeal to the diversity of women. It is clear that the current policy promises are heavily constrained in the post-Brexit, post-pandemic fiscal circumstances (Annesley and Gains 2012). These constraints are evident not only in what parties are pledging, but in what they are not. For example, much controversy has surrounded Labour's refusal on fiscal grounds to abolish the 'two-child limit', which limits means-tested benefits to the first two children (Stewart and Patrick 2024). The two-child limit hits women financially harder as they are more likely than men to rely on social security (Women's Budget Group 2023c).

Some policy promises address class-based demands, particularly from Labour, such as tackling the gender pay gap and support for women experiencing the menopause. But there are limitations in class-based policies from both parties—the Conservatives' roll out of 30 hours of free childcare to children from 9 months is underfunded and selective in its targeting in being only available to working parents. At the same time, while Labour were universally offering breakfast clubs to all primary schools, the Party retreated from an earlier promise at past elections of pledging universal childcare. Women continue to undertake the bulk of care, which hinders their ability to enter or return to the labour market. To tackle this disparity, the new Labour government, and the respective Scottish and Welsh governments, will need to offer large-scale and structural—rather than piecemeal—reform, which fundamentally addresses deep-rooted issues pertaining to sufficiency and sustainability of the early years sector.

There were a variety of status policies on offer from the Labour Party, around tackling violence against women and policies to address underrepresentation. The Conservative policy offer on violence against women was narrowly focused on legislative changes on life sentences for sex offences and to prevent registered sex offenders from changing their identities. Far more attention is paid in the Conservative Party pitch to asserting women's rights over 'trans' rights and to critiquing a range of EDI practices across all policy domains. Yet evidence on women's policy concerns suggests these are not at the top of women's MIIs. In particular, the Conservative strategy of weaponizing the 'woman question' looks to be a discourse more directed at internal audiences in the forthcoming internal battle for the next leadership than a valid or effective pitch for women's votes. Not only do these policies fail to align with women's priorities, but they also fail to tackle the structured inequalities in society, a key aspect that is outlined in the APM.

What is also apparent in the early examination of how the parties made their electoral appeals for women's votes is the complications that will arise from centralized parties promising policy action when many of the levers of prioritization and implementation lie with devolved governments or local authorities. And

the lop-sided nature of the asymmetrical state is also apparent in policy areas of key concern for women, such as childcare, where the central state still exerts policy-making potential without bearing the fiscal cost.

Though very much based on the long campaign, our analysis of the parties gendered appeals identified the key gendered battlegrounds of the 2024 election and beyond. We contribute to the developing analytical literature on gendered policy promises and take further the analysis of the diversity and nature of campaigns to win women's votes. This early analysis points to the constraints on the policy space for the new Labour administration to address the economic disadvantage facing many women due to the gendered nature of access to the labour market despite the identification of worsening household finances being the MII identified by women. Meanwhile, appeals based on 'weaponizing the woman question' are likely to have less electoral appeal since they do not appear to align with women's preferences, as shown in public opinion data. Early analysis suggests that the gender gap in 2024 will be less stark than previous elections, due to increased Labour support among both women *and* men voters, and decreased Conservative support (with men more likely to vote for Reform UK) (Fowler and Sanders 2024). However future research should examine the gender gap at the 2024 general election once post-election survey data are available.

The rhetoric and promises of the party conference speeches also serve to highlight the continuing contradictions of the asymmetrical power model where holders of national office of state and their shadows make pledges which they may not be able to deliver. Our analysis suggests the deeply rooted gendered inequalities of the APM are unlikely to be substantially altered despite the foregrounding of women and gender in the policy promises of the two main parties in the long and short campaign of the 2024 election. The gendered structural inequalities in society are difficult to address in the current fiscally constrained national finances and in the era of devolved government. Gendered inequalities are likely to continue to underpin and infuse the British Political Tradition.

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