

Kim

(Following welcome from Jan Lloyd)

Good Morning

Nearly five years ago, I graduated with a degree in Sociology and Gender Studies, wondering 'what comes next?' Upon my return to Milton Keynes, I decided that volunteering for a women's organisation would be my next step and I joined the Management Committee for the Milton Keynes Women & Work Group. Today, I'm proud to be setting the ball rolling on this symposium in my capacity as the recently appointed Chair of the Women & Work Group.

We've invited you here today because we recognise a changing economic climate for local women, and the organisations such as ourselves who seek to support them.

Established in 1978, Women & Work have always understood the priorities and needs of local women who are looking to return to the workplace or otherwise enhance their skills. We have always had high take up of our courses, plenty of demand for our IAG services and most of our new clients find us through personal recommendation from other women. That, coupled with the monitoring and follow-up surveys we undertake, tells us that women value our services, feeling stronger and more capable to seek work and participate in their family life too.

As an organisation, Women & Work are experiencing changes in our funding streams that make our work more challenging. Previously, our core activities of providing information, advice, guidance and training supported women on a journey of development to increase their employability and we were funded in advance in order to that work. As many of you who also work within the voluntary and community sector will also know, there has been a shift away from this model of funding. Funds are now released retrospectively, awarding funds after targets have been met. And the targets are now less concerned with 'soft outcomes' around women's employability, instead looking simply at whether or not she is employed. Women & Work has long prided itself on the ability to work with women at their own pace, building her self-esteem, confidence and skill set at a pace she is comfortable with. With demanding targets and no funds allocated until they are met, the current climate causes a tension to meet women's needs whilst also moving at funder's pace instead.

These days, 'feminist' has become a bit of a dirty word but Women & Work has always been a feminist organisation and, today, I intend to reclaim the word to mean something positive. Our feminism means supporting women to be the best they can be, for themselves and their families. We've invited you all here today, recognising that Milton Keynes is populated by women of skill, influence and creativity. However, we must recognise that the world, and this city, is not a level playing field for all women. In 2009, women still experience a range of circumstances that disadvantages them economically and this situation is only worsening during this current economic downturn. In a

moment, Avril will take us through some up-to-date research to give you further details but I can tell you that this research illustrates the links between education and employment outcomes for women as individuals, and the impact that those outcomes can have on society more broadly, particularly in terms of strengthening our economy. So, this morning has an unashamedly feminist agenda, seeking to work towards a better lot for the women of Milton Keynes, and therefore a better lot for local families and the local economy as a result.

So, I hope that this has really just given you the context within which we, as an organisation that strives to understand and recognise the needs of local women, are working in. The aim of today is gather together all of our knowledge and ideas and to look wider, at how we can address those needs together, as a city.

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