

Women and the Coalition government: turning back the clock?

Christina Pantazis introduces the themed section for this issue.



The position of women over the next few years is uncertain and possibly even precarious.

Britain is still an inherently unequal society, but the steady strides towards gender equality since the 1970s, in both private and public domains, appear to be threatened and may even be reversed by the policies of the Coalition government.

Indeed Yvette Cooper, as Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, went as far as to warn that the Coalition's fiscal measures represented the 'biggest reversal of women's opportunities and economic independence' since World War One (*The Guardian*, 2010a). Her analysis demonstrated that women will bear the brunt of the government's budget cuts; overall nearly three quarters of the savings made by its 2010 Emergency Budget will come from female taxpayers (*The Guardian*, 2010b). As a consequence women will experience a demonstrable decline in their living standards over the next few years. Already vulnerable groups – female lone parents and female single pensioners – will be the biggest losers; respectively seeing a 19 per cent and 12 per cent drop in their incomes through public service cuts by 2014/2015 (Women's Budget Group, 2010).

Whilst an estimated 300,000 women will become redundant as a result of public sector 'savings' (*The Guardian*, 2010a), cuts to the voluntary sector will leave many more women's jobs vulnerable. As growing numbers of women lose their jobs, David Cameron's vision of the Big Society will materialise with many women returning to perform

their traditional caring roles and responsibilities. On the other hand, those 'lucky' enough to keep their jobs will have to work for longer, often for less pay, and can look forward to a reduced pension on retirement if the government succeeds with its plans to reform public sector pensions.

Furthermore, the cuts are already leading to the closure of many women's organisations and services (see Women's Resource Centre, undated) and potentially having catastrophic consequences for some women. For example, female victims of violence may find it more difficult to escape, or be rescued, from abusive relationships or situations. Together with the Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke's misguided statements about rape and sentencing proposals for rapists, the government's commitment to ending gendered violence (HM Government 2010; 2011) can be seriously questioned. Indeed pieced together it is not difficult to see how the Coalition's policies will amount to a serious assault on women's freedoms and well-being.

In this context, the *cjm*'s theme on women, violence and harm could not be more timely. It examines a broad range of topics affecting women. Its starting point is that violence against women and girls is 'a widespread and persistent form of gender inequality' (Walby et al., 2010). In the week that this introduction was being written, yet another woman – Christine Chambers, a 38 year old from Essex – was shot dead along with her daughter by her ex-partner (BBC, 2011). The details of this case expose

further disturbing truths about the extent and persistence of interpersonal gendered violence. Nearly 1,000 women have been killed by their partner or ex-partner in the last decade (Smith et al., 2011). Yet, these killings represent the tip of the iceberg in terms of male perpetrated violence against women. A staggering one in five women aged 16 to 59 have been sexually assaulted in their life time, whilst the same proportion of women have experienced stalking (Flatley et al., 2010).

Women are also exposed, in different ways to men, to structural harm in the form of poverty, discrimination, and prejudice. This is despite the wave of progressive legislation, including the 1970 *Equal Pay Act*, the 1975 *Sex Discrimination Act*, and 2010 *Equality Act*. For example, women working full time in the UK in 2010 earned just 85 per cent of the average earnings of men (Perfect, 2011), they are more likely to be found among the low paid with 64 per cent of low paid workers being women (Cooke and Lawton, 2008), and they have greater risks of poverty (Pantazis and Ruispini, 2006), particularly if they are from an ethnic minority background. Moreover, simply being pregnant or being on maternity leave puts women at risk of losing their job; 30,000 women lose their job each year in this way (EOC, 2005). There are serious concerns that the recession will make pregnant women or women on maternity leave even more vulnerable to workplace discriminatory practices unless the government takes a tougher response (Fawcett, 2009).

Structural harm can also encompass state activities and this often impacts on the most vulnerable of women – women seeking asylum, as well as women detained in prison or mental health institutions. Sometimes state actors may inadvertently ‘collude’ with perpetrators of inter-personal gendered violence. Thus, within hours of Christine Chamber’s death coming to light criticisms were already being levelled against the police for not taking her complaints seriously (BBC, 2011). It does not take much of an imagination to connect the failure to tackle the killing of women by their current or ex-partners to state institutional failings. Yet, none of these issues appear to be key in current government initiatives to tackle gendered violence.

Thus, a central rationale for this theme on women, violence and harm is that there are gains to be made in not de-coupling the individual level harm experienced by women from those generated by structural processes. Otherwise we miss an opportunity of seeing how individually and socially mediated processes may exist in parallel and how they may mutually or simultaneously serve to reinforce and exacerbate gendered harms (Pantazis, 2004). At the present time this perspective is all the more pressing.

The first three articles in this themed section of *cjm* all address the important question of what can be done to tackle inter-personal gendered violence. For **Somali Cerise** and **Holly Dustin** a gendered perspective has been missing from policy approaches; this has meant that gender inequality has not been central to understanding and responding to violence against women and girls. All too often, they argue, the focus in terms of the problem has been on dysfunctional men and, increasingly, dysfunctional communities or cultures whilst the emphasis in terms of responses has been on punishment. Instead they favour long-term integrated solutions which emphasise the role of education in order to ensure that gendered violence is the social taboo

it ought to be. In this context they argue that the Coalition’s measures are ‘piecemeal and short-sighted.’ **Anette Ballinger** argues that there are important lessons to be learnt from the mistakes made by the previous Labour government’s response to gendered violence. She presents a critical review of their policies and warns against redefining gendered violence as a *crime* problem and the promotion of *criminal justice processes* as the solution at the expense of addressing ‘the wider unequal power structure’ and women’s subordinate position. Lessons from the United States, India and beyond, both historically and contemporaneously, are offered from **Victoria Law** to illustrate how community-organising can provide a basis for tackling gendered violence, particularly when the state is failing to take action.

Roanna Mitchell writes about the importance of challenging the negative culture surrounding women’s bodies. She reports on the Endangered Species Summit London where participants from different industries and sectors – advertising, education, performing arts, and fashion – came together with ‘a common goal: to move forward in challenging the culture that teaches girls, women, and increasingly men, to hate their own bodies.’

The theme of young people and violence is developed in **Christine Barter’s** article. She uncovers disturbing evidence about the extent of violence between young people within their personal relationships. Her research with the NSPCC reveals that a shocking one in four girls and one in five boys experienced physical partner violence, whilst one in three girls and 16 per cent of boys experienced sexual violence. Emotional violence was an even bigger problem with three in every four girls and one in every two boys admitting that they had been emotionally abused by their partners. The study demonstrates the clear need for child welfare policy to be revised to take into account childhood violence.

The challenges of working with women involved as offenders in the criminal justice system who are or

have been in abusive relationships are raised by **Stella Vickers and Paula Wilcox**. They write that ‘the experience of violence, abuse, neglect and cruelty in childhood or later life impacts significantly on women’s experiences and is a key risk factor for women’s offending... working with women offenders of necessity involves addressing the complex, long term impacts of such abuse.’ In this context, they argue that women’s community services can provide supportive and trusting spaces for women so that they can begin to overcome some of their entrenched problems.

On this theme, **Mary Corcoran’s** article assesses the impact of the gender-focused approaches on policies and practice relating to women offenders. She argues that ‘gender mainstreaming has exerted some influence insofar as official discourse now generally acknowledges the need for distinctively gender-focused approaches to offenders and prisoners.’ Nevertheless whilst evaluations of the recently created, post-Corston, women’s community centres seem positive, their future seems much less certain as the squeeze on funding begins to impact on public and voluntary providers of these services.

Writing about structural gendered harm, **Vicky Canning** reports on the double victimisation of vulnerable women seeking asylum in the UK. She argues that ‘women have been subjected to state sanctioned sexual violence or lack of state protection and prosecution in countries of origin or during migration, and often continue to experience state sanctioned social and emotional harm in the UK asylum system.’ Thus, far from providing a safe haven for these women, the UK asylum system acts to further exacerbate their suffering when they are disbelieved by officials and are not offered appropriate support. Further, for those women wrongly returned to their country of origin, this could prove potentially life threatening.

Finally, **Anna Bird** from the Fawcett Society gives further consideration to how women will be disproportionately affected by the



governments cuts and argues that 'women face a triple jeopardy of job losses, benefit cuts, and the expectation that they will fill the looming "care gap".' It is hard not to disagree with her observation that 'many of these individual fiscal measures will do a great deal of harm, but add them together and the effects are disastrous.' As a result of the Coalition government's failure to consider the gender impacts of its policies, the Fawcett Society's decision to launch a legal review of the government's Budget and Comprehensive Spending Review is to be welcomed.

Challenging the government's policies on women will not always be easy or without risk, particularly for organisations and services dependent on government funding for survival (see *The Guardian*, 2011). However, it is critically important for campaigners of gender

equality to unite and use every opportunity to challenge the Coalition's policies so that we move forward, not backwards, in tackling gendered harm and violence. ■

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