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What Did the Coalition Government Do For Women? An Analysis of Gender Equality Policy Agendas in the UK 2010 – 2015

Anna Sanders, Claire Annesley, Francesca Gains

Abstract

The UK Coalition era 2010-15 was characterised as being detrimental to women. However, to date, research has not comprehensively examined the impact on gender equality of the Coalition's policies in different policy domains. This paper examines policies that were introduced to address gender inequality and policies that had a detrimental impact on gender equality during the five years of Coalition government. We draw on a typology of gender equality policies which categorises policies as either addressing the class or status basis of gender inequalities and scholarships that demonstrates that the determinants of policy change will vary depending upon which type of policy is brought forward. We find that numerous status-based gender equality policies reached the government agenda as well as some class-based policies. However, this agenda setting activity around gender equality needs to be set against the Coalition's austerity policies, which removed significant provision for gender equality and set limits on the effectiveness of some new initiatives.

Key words agenda setting • gender equality policies • austerity • policy change

Introduction

The period of the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in the UK 2010-15 was linked with analytical expectations that progress on policies advocating gender equality was likely to stall (Annesley and Gains, 2013), and that, in some policy areas, progress towards economic gender equality would in fact be reversed (Annesley and Gains, 2014; Campbell and Childs, 2015). These expectations derive from the comparative gender policy literature which differentiates between types of gender equality policy and the factors that determine which types of policy issues progress onto governmental agendas, and when (Annesley, Engeli and Gains 2015). In addition, extant literature has demonstrated the

gendered impact of austerity on women. Much of this academic work has taken a specific focus on areas such as welfare reform (MacLeavy, 2011); women's employment (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013), and the sphere of reproduction (Pearson and Elson, 2015). However, to date there has not been a comprehensive analysis of Coalition policies in relation to gender equality to answer the question once and for all: 'what did the Coalition Government do for women?'

This paper uses a typology of gender equality policies to examine the policy agendas of the Coalition Government to assess both policies brought forward to address gender inequalities and policies which impacted detrimentally on gender equality. Initially we draw on a typology of gender equality policies which differentiates between policies that address the class basis of gender inequalities and those that address women's unequal status. It is argued that the determinants of policy change will vary depending the type of policy brought forward (Htun and Weldon 2010; Annesley, Engeli and Gains, 2015). Broadly speaking, this literature leads us to expect that policies to improve or address gender equality would fall off the government agenda during a right-leaning government and when the economy stopped growing.

Our initial findings suggest that, indeed, costly class based gender equality policies were not brought forward and that some policies addressing austerity did have negative implications for economic gender equality. In contrast, some status policies addressing bodily integrity continued to be introduced despite the economic constraints. In concluding, we argue that a comprehensive understanding of gender equality policy agendas in times of austerity will contribute to the analysis of gender equality policy in both form and dynamics. We advance the notion that our case study of the UK in 2010-15 can be seen as a useful model globally in the context of national agendas for austerity that might present challenges for, and conflicts with, gender equality objectives.

The determinants of gender equality policy reform agendas under austerity

Government policy agendas can have both positive and negative effects on the likelihood of achieving gender equality. Gender equality policy agendas can seek to address the disparities between the life chances of men and women. However, this change is not uni-directional nor necessarily positive. Previous policy reforms addressing gender inequality can be dismantled. And some policy changes, not introduced specifically to address gender inequality, can nevertheless impact on those differential life chances. The following section presents an analytical framework for understanding the type of gender equality policies which tackle inequalities and circumstances in which their progress is supported or stalled.

Developing a framework on policy change worldwide, Htun and Weldon (2010) argue that sex equality policy can be disaggregated into a typology of two main categories. The first is ‘gender status’ policies: those policies which aim to empower all women as a group and counter the discrimination faced by women as women (Htun and Weldon, 2010, 209). Policies which fall under this realm may include those concerning women’s bodily integrity, such as violence against women, trafficking and abortion legality, or may include policies such as gender quotas and family rights. Same-sex marriage can also be regarded as a status policy, since these policies challenge assumptions of heterosexuality.

The second category that Htun and Weldon (2010) identify is ‘class-based’ policies. These policies seek to challenge the inequalities that stem from the sexual division of labour. Unlike status policies, class-based policies are redistributive in their intention, aiming to encourage a more equitable division of resources between men and women. By calling for public resources, class-based policies aim to shift women out of the unpaid domestic sphere and towards the paid labour market instead (Htun and Weldon, 2010). For instance, equal pension rights, family welfare policies, parental leave, state funding for reproductive rights

and government-funded childcare can all be considered as class-based policies, since they relate to women's roles in the paid labour market by ensuring that paid work is beneficial to all women.

Annesley and Gains (2013) took this approach forward, examining when 'costly' class-based policy reform reached governmental agendas, measured empirically by when they reach the Queen's Speech as a statement of serious government intent. The finding was that it is difficult to do when the economy is not growing (Annesley and Gains, 2013). Next, Annesley, Engeli and Gains (2015) examined what factors determine when class and status policies reach government agendas across a five country comparative analysis. They found that found that the determinants of gender equality policies are heterogeneous. The study confirmed a link between GDP growth and class policies reaching governmental agendas but also showed that policies addressing the 'costly' class-based gender equality were linked with the presence of women representatives in the legislature and social democratic representation. The conclusion in that study was that these 'costly' policies required wide legislative support and coalitions between feminists and the labour unions to advocate for reform. In contrast, policies addressing the status of gender inequality were more likely to reach government agendas where there were women in executive roles. The analysis also found that the key determinant was not link to cost, or a commitment to achieving labour market and welfare improvement, but that potentially contentious policies around women's status required a critical actor in government with power and resources to drive through change. For instance, Harriet Harman notes that, until she was appointed Solicitor General 2001-05, campaigners against domestic violence had "never had anyone in government to bring it all together and single-mindedly take forward their cause. But now I'd been appointed and was there on the inside, I could make changes throughout the system, support victims, deter perpetrators and challenge embedded attitudes" (Harman, 2017, 232).

Turning to the Coalition 2010-15, we use these typologies to inform our expectations of how these key determinants shaped the likelihood of government attention towards gender equality policy and policy change. What were the economic conditions? The type of party in government? The presence of female representatives in the legislature especially in the party of government? And the presence of female actors in the executive? We assess the presence/absence of these determinants during the period 2010-15 before turning to each policy type to set out our expectations for the gender equality policy agendas in relation to these determinants.

Following the 2010 election, the Coalition was formed between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. In the run up to the election, both parties – as well as Labour – pledged a series of commitments to gender equality in their manifestos. Increased gender equality pledges on behalf of the Conservatives reflected the party's attempts to modernise the party since 2005, under the leadership of David Cameron. For the first time, there was consensus between the parties on a range of gender equality pledges, such as maternity pay, flexible working and the gender pay gap (Campbell and Childs, 2010). Elsewhere, other pledges were made to women, including: addressing trafficking, increasing the State Pension Age, increasing the number of Sure Start health visitors, (Conservatives); introducing a 'Toddler Tax Credit', increasing spending on Sure Start services, DNA retention (Labour); allowing night buses to stop-on-request, electing more diverse police authorities, and introducing a Citizen's Pension (Liberal Democrats). Judging by the parties' manifestos, at least, it appeared as if gender equality would be on the government's agenda.

However, the election took place in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis following five consecutive quarters of negative economic GDP growth (BBC News, 2015). Even when the economy started to grow again, the dominant party in the Coalition, the Conservative Party, stood on a platform of austerity and a commitment to reducing state

expenditure. The Labour Party (social democrats) lost seats and became the official opposition. Although the number of women in Parliament increased slightly, from 128 to 143 MPs, the share of women in government fell because the proportion of female representatives in the two governing parties was lower than the predecessor Labour administration (which elected 81 women MPs) – both Conservative (49 women MPs) and Liberal Democratic (7 women MPs). Of the five Liberal Democrats to hold positions in Cabinet, none of these appointments were women. The absence of Liberal Democrat women in key decision-making roles leads Evans (2011, 146) to argue that, “Despite the equal opportunity rhetoric, the party is an institution embedded in a masculine ethos and ideology”. However, one notable feature of female representation in the Coalition cabinet was Theresa May who, as Home Secretary 2010-15 and Minister for Women and Equalities 2010-12, should be considered a critical actor.

Given these economic and political determinants our expectations are that an examination of Coalition policy agendas would show:

- that status gender equality policies would continue to come forward on Government agendas given that these are not dependent on economic growth or the presence of social democrats, but do require the presence of a critical feminist actor in the executive, but
- no progress on class-based policies addressing gender inequalities due to contracting GDP and the ideological commitment to reducing state intervention and welfare spending and reduced representation of women in the legislature; and
- that policies addressing austerity would have a negative impact on gender equality.

In the following section we examine policies brought forward from 2010-2015 to assess our expectations.

Status Policies

Violence against Women and Girls

The commitment to ending Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) played a central part in the Coalition's agenda of gender equality policy. Within its 2011 'Action Plan', the Coalition outlined its strategy to tackle VAWG (HM Government, 2011). The strategy focused on four key areas: prevention, provision of good quality services, partnership working and protection (HM Government, 2011). To this end, the Coalition introduced a range of legislation and law enforcement tools from 2010 which highlighted its pledge to eradicate VAWG. Legislative action included, *inter alia*; the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012, under which stalking was made a specific offence, the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which focused on the prosecution of slavery and human trafficking, and the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, under which the possession of realistic depictions of rape and revenge pornography was criminalised (HM Government, 2014; Campbell and Childs, 2015). Additionally, in 2013, the Home Office extended the legal definition of domestic violence to include those aged 16 and 17 (Woodhouse and Dempsey, 2016).

As announced in the Queen's Speech in 2014, legislation was introduced to tackle anti-social behaviour in the form of the 2014 Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act. The Act also oversaw the criminalisation of forced marriages in England and Wales. This aimed to ensure that the practice of forced marriages would be "robustly prosecuted" (HM Government, 2014, 8), reflecting the Coalition's underlying criminal justice approach towards VAWG policies. The following year, coercive and controlling behaviour was made a criminal offence in the Serious Crime Act 2015, made punishable with a maximum of five years' imprisonment (Woodhouse and Dempsey, 2016).

Legislative interventions were implemented to outlaw the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). FGM was first made illegal in the UK in 1985. Replacing this legislation, the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 made it illegal for UK citizens to practice FGM outside of the UK. This was later strengthened by the Serious Crime Act 2015 to include a mandatory reporting duty for FGM, as announced by the Prime Minister at the 2014 Girl Summit (Ministry of Justice and Home Office, 2015). 85 per cent of respondents were said to have supported the proposal (Ministry of Justice and Home Office, 2015). The Act also introduced female genital mutilation protection orders (FGMPOs). In July 2015, Bedfordshire police force secured the UK's first FGMPO, preventing two girls from leaving the UK (Dustin, 2016). The adequacy of such policies has been called into question, however, with some campaigners and service providers criticising the Government's emphasis on prosecution rather than awareness-raising measures (Women's Resource Centre, 2013; Dustin, 2016). Though there is currently a paucity of data surrounding the number of women affected by FGM, a Government-published report estimated that 170,000 women and girls in the UK have endured the procedure (House of Commons, 2014, 9). Yet, to date, only two men have ever been charged with FGM, and both defendants were acquitted in 2015.

Key to pushing VAWG policies up the Government's agenda was Home Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities, Theresa May. Speaking at the Women's Aid annual conference, May stated that, "My ambition is nothing less than ending violence against women and girls" (Home Office, 2011). May's ambition was reflected in her work with violence against women's charities: Harry Fletcher, director of the campaigning group Voice4Victims, noted in an interview, "I made approaches to her about the need for stalking law reform and she was extremely receptive and said 'You're pushing at an open door'...I found her, as a Conservative Home Secretary, to be extremely approachable on issues of protecting vulnerable women" (quoted in Prince, 2017, 278).

Within the Government's 'Action Plan 2014', May highlighted much of the Coalition's progress on VAWG (HM Government, 2014, 3-4). Policies included the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (DVDS), known as 'Clare's Law', under which members of the public can check with the police as to whether their partner has a history of violence, and the national roll-out of Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs), which prohibit perpetrators from returning to their home for up to 28 days (HM Government, 2014). Both the DVDS and DVPOs would provide the police and magistrates' courts with greater powers to protect victims, or potential victims, of domestic abuse (*ibid.*). Further, within the Action Plan, May noted the commission into police responses to domestic violence cases for which she had called (*ibid.*). The report, carried out by the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, led to a damning assessment of the police force's treatment of domestic violence cases. Since the report, May stated that "real improvements" had been made: every police force would be required to have an action plan to tackle domestic violence and, for the first time, forces would be obliged to compile data against a national standard on all domestic abuse crimes (Home Office, 2016).

Internationally, the Coalition demonstrated its determination to tackling VAWG through a range of initiatives. 2010 witnessed the creation of a Ministerial Champion on VAWG Overseas and, in 2011, the Coalition announced that it was to become a signatory to the EU Directive on Human Trafficking. Furthermore, the Queen's Speech 2013 stated that the Government would work towards preventing sexual violence in conflict worldwide. Accordingly, the UK led on the UN Security Council Resolutions 2106, which provided a framework to prevent sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict states (HM Government, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the Coalition made some symbolic gains in its strategy towards the eradication of VAWG. However, the issue of funding for its VAWG strategy has been the

subject of much concern. Within the 2012 Equality Strategy report, the Coalition highlighted its commitment to £28 million of central Government funding for specialist VAWG services, with £10.5 million over three years from 2012, which would be used to fund new rape support centres in England and Wales, and £900,000 towards domestic violence helplines until 2015 (HM Government, 2012, 9). Whilst this financial support was welcomed by many, some women's groups voiced concerns regarding reductions in local authority funding, upon which many VAWG organisations rely (FORWARD and Imkaan, 2011; Women's Resource Centre, 2013). Towers and Walby's (2012, 18-19) report into the impact of austerity cuts revealed that domestic and sexual abuse services saw 31 per cent of their local authority funding reduced between 2010/11 and 2011/12 – a cut from £7.8 million to £5.4 million.

A lack of local authority funding has led to a reduction in the expertise and availability of women's specialist support services across the UK, and in some cases, the closure of such services. The Women's Aid VAWG Roundtable Review reported that 32 domestic violence services in England have resorted to closing at least one of their services, of which 35 per cent supported children and young people (Towers and Walby, 2012, 28). Evidence suggests that some demographic groups of women have borne the brunt of austerity cuts harder than others (Dustin, 2016). VAWG organisations for Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BAMER) women expressed concerns that local authorities can no longer provide appropriate services required, due to the amalgamation of BAMER services into larger, generic service provision (FORWARD and Imkaan, 2011). Figures show that since 2010, 17 per cent of specialist refuges have closed in England, where around one in three referrals to refuges have been declined due to a lack of space (Hall, McIntosh, Neitzert, Pottinger, Sandhu, Stephenson, Reed, and Taylor, 2017, 4). Cuts in statutory funding have also impacted other women's services more widely: a report by the Women's Resource

Centre (2011) found that 52 per cent of women's organisations have reduced service provision in light of funding reductions.

Same-Sex Marriage

After gaining cross-party support, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act was passed in 2013, granting same-sex couples full legal marriage. Same-sex marriage was not mentioned in the Queen's Speech however, since the Coalition was still consulting on how the Marriage Bill should be introduced (Government Equalities Office, 2012). Ongoing consultations indicated the contention surrounding the principle of same-sex marriage, particularly within the Conservative Party. The Conservatives had long been divided on a range of social and moral issues. Since becoming Conservative leader, David Cameron sought to modernise what many saw as an 'out of touch' Party, and silence the intolerant voices within the backbenches (Kerr and Hayton, 2015, 116-7). The opposition from backbench Conservative MPs was soon illustrated, however, by the fact that more Conservative MPs voted against the Marriage Act than those who voted in favour (Bell, 2015).

Although the Marriage Act did not entirely grant equal rights to same-sex and heterosexual couples – for instance, same-sex couples have fewer pension inheritance rights and cannot marry in the Churches of England and Wales – the Act was still a “milestone” (Tatchell, 2013), symbolising the advancement of social liberalism (Bell, 2015).

Class-Based Policies

Austerity

Shortly after assuming office, the Coalition implemented a series of unprecedented spending cuts which were to commence immediately. Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, later claimed that the Liberal Democrats had a tempering influence on the Coalition's

policy agenda, through the blocking of policies such as scrapping housing benefit for young people (Cutts and Russell, 2015, 82). However, despite these interventions, the cumulative impact of the Coalition's austerity policies had a deleterious effect on the economic situation of women regarding their income, services and employment (Browne, 2011a; Annesley, 2014), which became colloquially known as 'the triple jeopardy' (The Fawcett Society, 2013).

Outlined in the June 2010 Emergency Budget and the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review, the Coalition expressed its commitment to a deficit reduction plan. This was to be achieved at a ratio of 77:23; in other words, approximately 77 per cent was to be raised through spending cuts and 23 per cent through increased taxes (Osborne, 2010; Women's Budget Group, 2010). The Coalition's decision to impose deep cuts, rather than tax increases, had gendered ramifications. This is largely explained by the fact that women in the UK are more likely to depend on the welfare state for their sources of income (Busby and James, 2016). Indeed, women are more likely to rely on transfer payments and public services than men (Women's Budget Group, 2010). Additionally, women make up the majority of public sector employment, comprising over two-thirds of the public sector workforce (Cribb, Disney and Sibieta, 2014, 2).

Cuts to the public sector workforce – a sector in which women are more likely to work – led to concerns regarding women's employment. Whilst women's employment rates increased by 3.2 per cent between 2010 and 2015 (compared to an increase in men's employment rate of 2.5 per cent) (ONS, 2018) there was a growth in casualised and precarious forms of work, in which women are more likely to be concentrated. The percentage of the workforce employed in zero-hours contracts (54 per cent of whom are women) grew from 0.6 in 2010 to 2.4 in 2015 (Healy and Bergfeld, 2016). The number of employees in temporary work (55 per cent of whom are women) increased from 5.8 per cent of the work force in 2010, to 6.2 per cent in 2015 (TUC, 2015; Healy and Bergfeld, 2016).

Moreover, women also comprise 73 per cent of part-time workers (Women's Budget Group, 2017a), where the number of women working part-time was up from 5.82 million in 2010 (ONS, 2010), to 6.15 million in 2015 (ONS, 2015).

Home Secretary, Theresa May, warned the Chancellor of the Exchequer of the disproportionate effect of spending cuts on groups such as women, ethnic minorities, pensioners and people with disabilities (Dodd, 2010). In the leaked letter, May expressed that a failure to acknowledge the gendered impact of these spending decisions would breach equality laws (*ibid.*). As enshrined in the Equality Act 2010, the government has a statutory duty to pay 'due consideration' to the impact of its policies on gender equality. Despite this legal obligation, the Treasury failed to immediately provide a full Equalities Impact Assessment of its economic policy (Annesley and Himmelweit, 2010). In the absence of official Government figures, independent attempts have been made to evaluate the gendered impact of the Coalition's austerity policies since 2010 (Cracknell, 2013).

Drawing on House of Commons Library research, the Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, Yvette Cooper, stated that women would be hit hardest by the Coalition's Emergency Budget (Campbell, 2010). Analyses of tax and benefit changes demonstrated that between 2010 and 2013, £11,454 million (79 per cent) of welfare cuts had come from women's pockets, compared with £2,956 million (21 per cent) from men's (Busby and James, 2016). In essence, approximately three quarters of the cuts were shouldered by women, meaning that they were hit financially twice as hard by austerity relative to men. Commenting on the 2010 Emergency Budget, Yvette Cooper stated that the proposed cuts were "the worst for women since the creation of the welfare state" (quoted in Stratton, 2010).

Further, the Fawcett Society commissioned the IFS to examine the cumulative impact of tax and benefit reforms on women between 2010 – 2011 and 2014 – 2015 (Browne, 2011a,

1-2). Accordingly, the IFS concluded that single women lost more as a percentage of their income than single men (*ibid.*). This was largely because lone parents were net losers from the changes, and the majority of lone parents (92 per cent) are women (Browne, 2011b; ONS, 2012). Women were also less likely to benefit from tax changes such as raising the Higher Rate Threshold to £50,000, since they comprise just 27 per cent of higher rate taxpayers (Watson and Urquhart), and were less likely to benefit from the raise in the Personal Tax Allowance to £10,000 (introduced in 2014), since 66 per cent of those earning under the Personal Allowance are women (Women's Budget Group, 2017b, 2).

Third, the Women's Budget Group (WBG), an independent think-tank, built upon modelling by Howard Reed (Landman Economics) to examine the gendered impact of cuts announced in the Coalition's budgets and spending reviews. The WBG analysed the cumulative impact of the Coalition's fiscal policy on different types of families from the June 2010 Emergency Budget to the June 2013 Spending Round (WBG, 2013a, 5; Annesley, 2014, 4). The analysis revealed that lone parents – 92 per cent of whom are women (Browne, 2011b, ONS, 2012) - and single pensioners – 71 per cent of whom are women (Women's Budget Group, 2016, 2) - witnessed the greatest reduction in their disposable incomes due to tax and benefit changes (Annesley and Himmelweit, 2010). Single mothers were estimated to lose 15.6 per cent of their income, whilst single female pensioners were considered to have lost approximately 12.5 per cent of their income respectively (WBG, 2013a, 2). Comparatively, single fathers lost 11.7 per cent, whilst single male pensioners saw a reduction of 9.5 per cent of their incomes (*ibid.*, 2013a, 2).

Pensions

Another key area of Coalition activity has been pension reform. The Queen's Speech affirmed in 2010 that the Coalition would review the timetable for increasing the State

Pension Age (SPA). Legislation to equalise the SPA to 65 for men and women by 2020 had already existed under the Pensions Act 1995. However, in light of increased life expectancy rates, the Coalition Government aimed to bring forward the increase of SPA to 66 from 2020, in order to ensure that the State Pension system would be “affordable in the long term and fair between generations” (DWP, 2015). Under the 2011 Pensions Act, the Coalition accelerated the rise in women’s SPA from April 2016 (when SPA would reach 63) to reach 65 by November 2018, rather than April 2020 (Thurley and McInnes, 2016). The rapid change in SPA was considered detrimental to women: around 330,000 women in their late 50s would have to wait an extra 18 months before they receive their state pension, leaving them little time to adjust their retirement plans and prepare themselves financially (Ginn, 2013, 42).

Coalition plans to modernise the pension system were declared in the Queen’s Speech 2012 and 2013. The Pensions Act 2014 saw the introduction of the Single-Tier Pension (STP): a flagship policy of the Liberal Democrats that was championed by pensions minister, Steve Webb. The STP could be seen as an area of policy reform where a Liberal Democrat agenda-setter – in this case, Steve Webb – was able to champion reform of potential benefit to women. Commencing in April 2016, the STP was to combine the flat-rate Basic State Pension (BSP) and the earnings-related State Second Pension (S2P) into a flat rate STP of £144 per week if payable in full (2012/13 prices) (Ginn, 2013, 43). As part of Government plans for the new STP, workers would be required to have made 35 years of National Insurance Contributions (NICs), rather than 30 years under the BSP.

On one hand, women with low lifetime earnings were the major beneficiaries of the STP (Ginn and MacIntyre, 2013). This is, in part, because the STP ensures that the majority of working age women will gain a state pension above the means-tested guarantee credit, regardless of their marital status or earnings over their lifetime (*ibid.*). Yet the amount that

pensioners would receive from the STP was only slightly above the Pensions Credit Guarantee Level and would be approximately £30 per week below the international poverty threshold (WBG, 2014, 12). Moreover, the eligibility increase of NICs to 35 years meant that women were less likely to qualify for a full STP. Due to greater caring and domestic responsibilities, women are more likely than men to take time out of the labour market (Thurley, Keen and McGuinness, 2015, 3). As a result, many women will accrue a reduced STP, since time out of the labour market reduces pension entitlements (Lain, 2016).

Additionally, in 2014, the Queen's Speech promised greater flexibility over the use of retirement funds. This was delivered upon through the Taxation of Pensions Act in 2014, which gave those over the age of 55 the freedom to withdraw their pension savings as a lump sum (HM Treasury, 2014). These new freedoms were estimated to have a "mixed impact" on women (WBG, 2015, 15). On the one hand, women would have greater freedom over how to spend their pension pots. Yet because women are more likely to be among the purchasers whose annuities cost less than £10,000, women in retirement are more likely than men to receive a lower income from their annuities, which will have to stretch over their longer lifespans (WBG, 2015): around 56 per cent of women have annuity incomes of £100 a month or more, compared to approximately 80 per cent of men (DWP, 2005, 105). Although the selling of annuities may benefit some women who had previously bought annuities at poor rates, there were concerns that many women might be vulnerable to a reduced income later in their retirement (The Fawcett Society, 2015). Some also articulated concerns that pensioners would choose to "splurge" their retirement savings prematurely, resulting in more pensioners relying on the BSP (WBG, 2014, 13).

Childcare

Currently, the UK has some of the highest out-of-pocket costs for childcare in Europe (OECD, 2016, 9), where rising prices of childcare have placed financial pressures on lower and middle-income families (Brewer and Joyce, 2010). In both 2013 and 2014, the Queen's Speech affirmed Coalition plans to support working parents, making childcare more affordable to families and increasing its availability.

In the 2013 'More Affordable Childcare' report, the Coalition pledged an additional £200 million of extra support for childcare within Universal Credit from April 2016 and announced the introduction of a new tax-free childcare scheme for working families (Department for Education, 2013a) – partly funded by replacing the Childcare Voucher Scheme. Under the new tax-free scheme, the Government would contribute 20 per cent towards childcare costs of up to £2,000 per child each year (Gheera, Kennedy, Long and Seely, 2014). To qualify, families would need all parents – and one parent, in the case of a single-earner family – in work, each earning under £150,000 per year and must not be in receipt of Universal Credit (Seely, 2014, 2). Hailed by Cameron as “one of the biggest measures ever introduced to help with childcare costs”, the policy was designed to see more than 2.5 million families claim up to £1,200 per child, aiming to “incentivise as many women as possible to remain in the labour market” (Winnett, 2013; Dominiczak and Swinford, 2014).

Whilst many welcomed the help with childcare costs, there were concerns regarding families that fall into a gap between Universal Credit and the tax-free childcare scheme (Rutter, 2015, 7). For instance, certain families in receipt of tax credits may gain financially if they participate in the new tax-free childcare scheme (*ibid.*). Meanwhile, other families who are receiving support with their childcare costs through the new tax-free childcare scheme may be financially better off under Universal Credit or tax credits (*ibid.*). The policy was also notably “regressive” (Ben-Galim, 2013): approximately 80 per cent of those eligible for the tax-free scheme would be in the top 40 per cent of income distribution, whilst only 1 per cent

of families in the bottom 40 per cent of income distribution would be eligible (Alakeson, Hurrell and Whittaker, 2013, 6).

Furthermore, the Coalition reduced payable childcare costs in Working Tax Credit (WTC) from 80 per cent to 70 per cent from 2011. In order to claim WTC, the changes meant that couples with children would consequently have to work 24 hours a week instead of 16 (Hood and Phillips, 2015, 19-20). The changes also saw a freeze in the basic and 30 hour elements of WTC (Churchill, 2011, 212). It was expected that the changes would have adverse effects on lone parents and second earners (Annesley and Himmelweit, 2010, 15), particularly women. In April 2010, as many as 489,000 people, mostly mothers, claimed childcare costs through WTC (*ibid.*).

A lack of available childcare is often noted as a restricting factor on mothers' ability to enter the labour market (Paull, 2014, 20). An ONS Labour Force survey found that, as a result of the high cost of childcare, the number of women quitting their jobs in order to look after their children from home had risen by over 32,000 from 2010-11 (Osborne, 2010). As an aim to get more women into the workplace, the number of free childcare hours available for three and four year-olds was extended from 12.5 hours to 15 hours at the start of the 2010 Parliament (House of Lords, 2015). Yet demand for childcare in the UK has not been matched with supply: in June 2015, figures showed that 57 per cent of local authorities in England still did not have enough childcare places – up from 54 per cent in 2012 (Cassidy, 2015).

Cuts in public spending have meant reductions in early years educational services as well as a refocus on targeting higher-need families (Churchill, 2011, 215). A key Coalition policy was the national roll-out of free early education places for 20 per cent of the most disadvantaged two year-olds in 2013. That year, approximately 92,000 of the most

disadvantaged two year-olds were receiving up to 15 hours of fully funded childcare (DfE, 2013b). In 2014, the Queen's Speech highlighted the Coalition's plans to extend free childcare to more disadvantaged children. The Coalition delivered these plans in the form of the Childcare Payments Act 2014, which extended childcare places to 40 per cent of the most disadvantaged two year-olds (HM Treasury, 2013).

From 2010, a series of reforms were made to the Sure Start programme. Established in 1998 under New Labour, Sure Start brings together a variety of early education services, such as family support, and health services, as well as childcare and education in disadvantaged areas for children under four (Lewis, 2011, 72-3). In its aim to refocus Sure Start to the "neediest families" (HM Government, 2010, 19), the Coalition removed the ring-fence from Sure Start funding in April 2011 (Bate and Foster, 2015). Whilst the Coalition did commit to recruiting an additional 4,200 health visitors by 2015 (HM Government, 2010, 19), the withdrawal of ring-fenced funding, compounded by substantial cuts to local authorities, left early years education vulnerable (Stewart and Obolenskaya, 2015). Spending on early years education and Sure Start fell by 25 per cent between 2009/10 and 2012/13, from £2,508 to £1,867 per child (Rummary, 2016, 317). Reductions in spending on early education services and cuts to local authority budgets pertained to the closure of over 600 Sure Start centres in England between April 2010 and June 2014 (Stewart and Obolenskaya, 2015, 29).

Family Welfare

From 2010, family welfare policies underwent substantial change. A beneficial policy for many women, outlined in the Queen's Speech 2012, was greater flexibility of parental leave. The Children and Families Act 2014 saw the introduction of a new regime regarding shared parental leave and gave all employees the right to request flexible working. As part of the Coalition's aim to "encourage shared parenting from the earliest stages of pregnancy" (HM

Government, 2010, 20), it was announced that women who met the qualifying conditions would be able to end their maternity leave early, where she and her partner would be able to take shared parental leave and pay (BIS, 2013, 7).

Notwithstanding greater flexibility of work for mothers, a series of tax and benefit reforms from the advent of the Coalition reversed many of the gains made towards gender equality. Firstly, the Coalition announced that from 2011, eligibility for the Sure Start Maternity Grant – a one-off lump payment of £500 to support the cost of having a child – would be limited to the first child only (HM Treasury, 2010, 34). Since the majority of Sure Start recipients are women (DWP, 2011), this impacted women disproportionately. Indeed, cuts to the Sure Start maternity grant were expected to be felt by 262,000 women (PCS, 2013, 7). This was compounded by the abolition of the Health in Pregnancy Grant – a tax-free payment of £190, and the scrapping of the ‘baby’ element of Child Tax Credit, which was paid to families with a child under the age of one (HM Treasury, 2010, 47). Additionally, Child Trust Funds were terminated in 2011, as part of the Coalition’s deficit reduction programme (Edmonds, 2014, 13).

One key area of benefit spending which witnessed significant cuts was Child Benefit. The Coalition announced it would taper Child Benefit paid to families with an individual earning over £50,000 per year and would withdraw the benefit completely for those earning over £60,000, from 2013 (HM Treasury, 2012). These changes arguably penalised lone parents – the majority of whom are women: whilst lone parents earning slightly over £50,000 would have their Child Benefit taxed, households with two earners with salaries slightly under £50,000 respectively would still retain their Child Benefit. Prior to this, in the 2010 Emergency Budget, the Coalition announced that it would freeze Child Benefit in cash terms between 2011 and 2014 (HM Treasury, 2010, 34). Subsequently, Child Benefit would be increased by only 1 per cent, meaning that the benefit was significantly cut in real terms from

the beginning of the Coalition (Hills, 2015, 16). Since 98 per cent of Child Benefit payments are made to mothers, these changes impacted women disproportionately (Merrick and Bignell, 2013).

Finally, the Queen's Speech 2014 stated that marriage would be recognised in the tax system, through a married couple's allowance – or the 'Transferable Tax Allowance' (TTA). The TTA allowed married couples and civil partners to transfer over £1,000 of their own personal tax allowance to their spouse from 2015 (Seely, 2016, 3). Yet the TTA was subject to much debate: the WBG estimated that because men comprise the majority of individual TTA beneficiaries, only 14 per cent of women would benefit from the policy (2014, 20-21). Furthermore, the policy has been criticised for breaching the principles of independent taxation, first introduced in 1990 (WBG, 2013b). Whilst same-sex couples were eligible for the TTA, lone parents, unmarried cohabiting parents and married parents where one parent pays a higher tax rate, would not qualify (Hayton, 2015, 155).

Findings

Our three expectations are borne out in this analysis of gender equality policy during the Coalition Government, both in terms of getting purposeful gender equality policy on the governmental agenda and in terms of the impact of other policies on gender equality.

As anticipated, progress on status gender equality policies did not stall during the Coalition era. New commitments to tackle VAWG, forced marriages and FGM were brought onto the government agenda. As found in previous research on governmental agendas, these gender equality actions are not dependent on economic growth nor on the presence of social democrats, but they do require the presence of a critical feminist actor in the executive. In this instance, Theresa May as Home Secretary serves as exemplar of a critical governmental actor who pushed forward with these status gender equality policies. New legislation on same-sex

marriages was also brought onto the Government's policy agenda. This was an issue championed by Prime Minister David Cameron as part of his commitment to modernising the Conservative Party.

Our second expectation was that no progress would be made during the Coalition Government on class-based policies addressing gender inequalities due to the economic circumstances characterised by negative and low GDP growth, the fact that this was a Coalition dominated by the political right, and because of the reduced representation of women in Parliament. At first glance it seems that some class-based gender equality issues did in fact reach the government agenda – the Single-Tier Pension, more affordable childcare, shared parental leave, and the married couple's allowance. However, our gender impact analysis of these reveals that, in each case, there is either a limited or a negative impact on women and gender equality. What is more, these have to be placed in the context of the Coalition's ideological economic commitment to reducing state intervention and welfare spending which removed considerable entitlements from women. The Coalition's strong ideological commitment to reducing state intervention and welfare spending took precedence over any commitment to gender equality. Whilst women MPs, such as Theresa May, individually raised concerns about the gendered impact of austerity policies, there was no critical mass of women MPs on the government benches advocating for gender equality policy and challenging the Coalition's economic approach.

Our third expectation – that the Coalition's ideological commitment to austerity policies had a negative impact on gender equality – holds up. There is clear evidence from across the Coalition term, and from a range of sources, that women bore the cost of austerity. This gendered effect derives from the Coalition commitment to rapidly reducing the deficit, by their decision to approach that process through cuts rather than increasing revenue, and because of women's stronger reliance on state intervention for incomes, services and

employment. In the context of the Coalition era of austerity and cuts it is essential to assess how previous provision for gender equality is dismantled as well as what new policies reach the agenda. It is also important to take into account the limited funding and resources that, in context of austerity, are provided to underpin new status and class-based gender equality initiatives.

Conclusions

Our analysis provides a deeper insight and better understanding of what the Coalition did for women. Whilst much of the existing analysis of the Coalition focuses exclusively on the gendered impact of cuts, our agenda setting approach finds that numerous status based gender equality policies reached the government agenda, with the help of critical actors in government. Somewhat contrary to our expectation given the economic and political circumstances, some class-based policies reached the government agenda as well. However, a closer reading of some of these casts doubt on their actual contribution to progress towards gender equality (e.g. the Transferable Tax Allowance, the Single-Tier Pension).

The Coalition's agenda setting activity around gender equality does, however, need to be set in the context of the Coalition's austerity policies. A strong commitment to rapidly reduce the budget deficit, and the decision to achieve this through cuts in expenditure rather than raising revenue, had the effect of removing or significantly reducing existing provision for gender equality. As we have shown, these cuts also negated the impact of many new policies being brought onto the agenda. What is more, the commitment to austerity also set limits on the effectiveness of some new gender equality initiatives coming onto the agenda, for example the commitment to 'more affordable childcare'. These findings pertain to a broader international relevance *vis-à-vis* the political and economic determinants for gender equality policy change. Broadly speaking, governmental agendas of fiscal retrenchment,

particularly in the case of right-leaning governments, can serve to undermine the impact of gender equality policies.

The analysis of the Coalition period with regards gender equality raises some important methodological issues. Firstly, agenda setting data counts only instances when something is put onto the governmental agenda. It does not capture the removal or retrenchment of existing gender equality policies. Any accurate analysis of progress over time, and particularly across periods of recession or austerity, has to balance both parts of the equation. Secondly, this paper has underscored the need for thorough analysis of gender equalities policies to understand both the content and the impact of the measures introduced and the measures removed. Future research will need to develop effective ways of capturing the dynamics of gender equality retrenchment over time and comparatively, as well as those instances of gender equality agenda setting.

Notes

¹ Income Tax: Written question – HL5927, 26 March 2015

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