Has Austerity driven a Feminist Democracy?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Dr Jackie Longworth, 2019[[2]](#footnote-2)

# ABSTRACT

**Are women more powerful now as a result of austerity?**

Historically, women’s voices have been marginalised and their contributions to politics and the economy have been under-recognised and undervalued. There are well known cases where changes improving women’s rights have been achieved through grass roots campaigns and activism which draw media attention. Less well known is the huge impact women’s groups and individual women have had through behind the scenes collaboration at the policy making level, including internationally. During the period of austerity since 2010, the economic position of women has been worsened by more than that of men, and in the Brexit debate UK women’s voices have been ignored, despite the continuing work of activists. This paper shows that, over the same period, the feminist movement has been successful in raising the profile of several individual issues affecting women, with the potential to influence policy. It raises the questions of whether such activity has been driven by austerity or something else, whether the techniques used on individual issues would improve the notice taken of women’s voices in wider political decision making, and whether the ‘end of austerity’ will lead to the re-marginalisation of women’s voices.

# INTRODUCTION

It is well-established that women have achieved much through collective grass roots action in the past. As Cohen and Page 2017[[3]](#endnote-1) discuss, such activism may be considered as “feminist democracy in action”, especially where it is heard by decision makers and leads to changes which improve women’s lives. On the other hand, there are times when women’s voices are not heard even when expressed with vigour and determination. At such times women have resorted to forms of ‘disruptive’ activism, which force the attention of mass grass roots women and hence the media and politicians. Historical examples of activism (some of which were ‘disruptive’, others not) include:

* The match girl strike of July 1888 was essentially caused by poor working conditions in a [match](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Match) factory, including fourteen-hour work days, poor pay, excessive fines and the severe health complications of working with [white phosphorus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allotropes_of_phosphorus), such as [phossy jaw](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phossy_jaw).  However, the strike itself was sparked by the dismissal of one of the workers on or about 2nd July 1888. By 16th July 1888 terms for return to work were agreed, but it was not until 1910 that the use of white phosphorus was banned, implementing an international convention, ‘Berne’.[[4]](#endnote-2)
* Emmeline Pankhurst[[5]](#endnote-3) became involved in women's suffrage as early as 1880 before founding (with others) the WSPU in 1903 which she led until it disbanded in 1918. Under her leadership the WSPU was a highly organised group of grass roots activists, and like other members she was imprisoned and went on hunger strike protests. In 1918 the Representation of the People Act was passed which allowed women over the age of 30 who met a property qualification to vote. Although 8.5 million women met this criterion, it only represented 40 per cent of the total population of women in the UK. It was not until the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 that women over 21 were able to vote and women finally achieved the same voting rights as men. This Act increased the number of women eligible to vote to 15 million.
* The Representation of the People Act would not have given so many women the vote in 1918 had it not been for the prior passing of the Married Women’s Property Act in 1882. This followed an earlier Act (1857) which allowed married women to keep income, but not own property. The campaign which achieved this was led by Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, a member of the feminist group ‘Ladies of Langham Place’ and author of ‘Summary of the Laws of England concerning Women’. Amongst other activities, they collected 26,000 signatures on a petition presented to the House of Lords in 1856, which lead to the 1857 Act[[6]](#endnote-4).
* Several long-lasting grass roots organisations of women became established as a result of either the suffrage campaign or the post WW1 aim to maintain women’s position in the labour market and society. These included, for example: The Women’s Engineering Society (WES, 1919); the Soroptomists (1921); the Fawcett Society (as the NUWSS, 1907); Women’s Institutes (1915), all of which remain active to this day.
* Later, in June 1968, scores of female strikers from Ford’s Dagenham plant, infuriated by a pay structure that blatantly favoured male workers, travelled to the streets of Whitehall. A meeting between eight strike leaders and Barbara Castle, who was then employment secretary, brokered a deal to end their three-week strike, which resulted in the women agreeing to return to work and the conception of the 1970 Equal [Pay](https://www.theguardian.com/money/pay) Act.[[7]](#endnote-5)
* The Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960’s and 70’s was the coming together of local grass roots groups of mostly young women.[[8]](#endnote-6) The movement worked with politicians and other policy formers and its many achievements included pressurising Parliament to pass the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act.[[9]](#endnote-7)
* The NGO forum that ran alongside the 1995 UN conference in Beijing was attended by 40,000 women from across the globe. Feminists in independent NGOs worked for the first time with the civil service and government delegates, independent women’s organisations, caucuses within mainstream organisations and trade unions to develop the Global Platform for Action which led to the UN Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) [see reference (i) for further description].

In the UK, the passing of the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act marked a step change for women in that it was the first time the Law recognised discrimination as a general issue, rather than addressing single issues and rights. The years since the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act can be loosely divided into three for the purpose of discussing women’s subsequent ongoing activism: the period to around 1997 marking the development of progressive equalities legislation resulting from EU regulation and international treaty (see for example, Cohen and Page 2017[[10]](#endnote-8)); the period between 1997 and 2010 when a growing force of strong Labour Women MPS influenced Parliament to build on and exceed EU requirements; and the period of government imposed ‘austerity’, 2010 to current, which has seen equality legislation undermined and in some cases repealed. The following sections look at these periods in more detail.

# The ‘European’ years (1975 – 1997)

It may not be coincidence that the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 closely followed the UK joining the European project (in 1973), at that time the Common Market (EEC) and subsequently the European Union (EU). Equality between women and men is one of the founding principles of the EU, going back to 1957 when the principle of equal pay for work of equal value became part of the Treaty of Rome. The UK had been seeking to join since 1961 but was blocked by France until 1969; it is at least arguable that the promise of Equal Pay (1970) and Sex Discrimination (1975) Acts was a necessary precursor to being accepted into membership, as was the establishment within the 1975 Act of a strong regulatory body, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC).

It is also at least arguable that when the UK joined with other European countries the locus of women’s campaigning for equal opportunities within the UK shifted from a grass roots mass movement to a more structural approach, with UK women’s organisations and individuals working with the EOC and partners from other EU countries to influence the development of EU regulation and UK law by behind the scenes discussion. In other words, collaboration and debate became more possible and more effective through the EU than it could be through the UK government of the 1980s, with the latter’s emphasis on privatisation, individualisation, and denial of the existence of society. Within this climate were born, and supported by EU funding, such organisations as Single Parent Action Network (1990) (see[[11]](#endnote-9) and ref. (i)). Umbrella organisations at the time, (for example the Women’s National Commission, the National Association of Women’s Organisations), recorded hundreds of local and national organisations as members, many of them set up by grass roots women. Compared with earlier mass movements, such organisations were largely unseen and unheard by both media and the UK Government, but their influence was felt indirectly through the work of NGOs to the EU and UN decision makers, and throughout this period women’s rights in law continued to improve [[12]](#endnote-10) [[13]](#endnote-11) [[14]](#endnote-12).[Footnote:[[15]](#footnote-3)]

On the other hand, women were making their presence felt in the media with mass protests such as 30,000 at the Greenham Common Peace Camp and the Miners’ Wives support group, amongst many others (see reference (v)). Whilst these movements were not specifically about the development of women’s rights within UK law, they did demonstrate a desire of women to have their voices heard in the wider political arena, and that this was not happening without grass roots activism of a disruptive kind.

At the same time there was growing dissatisfaction amongst the women’s rights movement in the UK: that the law wasn’t changing far enough or fast enough and was not being fully implemented on the ground; that women’s voices were not being heard within the UK structures of power; that poverty was increasing, particularly child poverty; that gender pay gaps persisted and the employment accessed by women was largely low paid and under-valued. The strong support from UK women for the UN Beijing NGO meeting, its ‘Platform for Action’ and the subsequent CEDAW[[16]](#footnote-4) may well be a symptom of such dissatisfaction. Direct lobbying of people in influential positions became more prevalent and overt; for example, the Women’s Budget Group started to lobby Government, other MPs and Civil Servants on gender and economic policy in 1989[[17]](#endnote-13). There was also lobbying on the issue of the representation of women in politics. For example, the Labour Women’s Network was established in 1988 with the express purpose of improving the number of women in Parliament; partial success came in 1997 with the use of all women shortlists, when the number of female Labour MPs rose from 37 to 101, though progress has halted since.

# The ‘Women in Parliament’ years (1997 – 2010)

Whilst the influence of EU Directives and Case Law continued to improve UK law on women’s equality (and equality across a wider spectrum of characteristics), there was a shift in the UK and the EU to go beyond the minimum requirements set by EU regulation and Directives. The EU Strategy for Gender Equality[[18]](#endnote-14) included ‘gender mainstreaming’ from around 1997, but as pointed out by Rubery, 2002[[19]](#endnote-15), its implementation amongst member states was patchy; for example, by 2001, the UK had established the positions of Ministers for Women and set up a women’s unit in the Cabinet Office. The UK Gender Equality Duty was established by the 2006 Equality Act, probably due to pressure from both these structures and the wider women’s movement following the coming into force of the Race Equality Duty (2001) and Disability Equality Duty (2006)[[20]](#endnote-16).

The arrival of more women, not only as MPs but also in Government, helped improve women’s economic position as well as their legal rights. For example, Dawn Primarolo, first as Secretary to the Treasury and then as Paymaster General, was influential in setting up the tax credit system in 2003 for pensioners, low paid workers, and children. Vera Baird, as Solicitor General and Criminal Justice Minister, oversaw the government’s first violence against women strategy. Harriet Harman was appointed the first ever Minister for Women by Tony Blair and subsequently Minister for Women and Equalities by Gordon Brown. In these roles she had a huge influence on the introduction of laws and policies affecting women, including steering the introduction of the 2010 Equality Act and making sure that women specific protections were enhanced within it and the draft Specific Duties Regulations under the Public Sector Equality Duties. Unfortunately, most of these enhancements were very quickly reversed by the Coalition Government formed after the 2010 general election.

However, this is not to say there was no feminist grass roots activism throughout this period of legislative and policy improvement. The LGBT and women’s movements succeeded in pressures to introduce laws: to prevent discrimination in employment based on sexual orientation; to repeal ‘Section 28’; to introduce civil registration of same sex partners; to allow Trans people legal recognition of their acquired gender; to prohibit UK nationals from carrying out FGM abroad, to name but a few. Women’s organisations campaigned successfully on the high death toll of women in prisons and on saving funding of women’s organisation in Northern Ireland, for example. Many more examples can be found in a time line from Fawcett (2016)[[21]](#endnote-17) .

# The ‘Austerity Years’ (2010 to present, 2018)

It is difficult to untangle the impact of the political decision to impose austerity on people in the UK from other ideological decisions of the 2010 Coalition Government and subsequent Tory governments. One of the first acts was to announce that the ‘social duty’ of Clause 1 of the Equality Act would not be commenced and subsequently that nor would they commence other clauses of specific reference to women. They disbanded the Women’s National Commission, which amongst other things was the umbrella organisation for NGO’s holding government to account under the UN CEDAW. So the decision to seek to reduce the national financial deficit by reducing taxes for business and the better off and reducing spending on social security and public services could be seen as but one of a string of measures which would adversely affect the poor and vulnerable and public service users; people who were well known to be disproportionately women[[22]](#endnote-18). A key example has been the undermining of the potential benefits of Universal Credit over the separate Tax Credits (which were initially universally accepted as a good thing) by reducing its funding and introducing restrictive rules about its implementation which significantly disadvantaged women[[23]](#endnote-19).

Women’s organisations and others were not silent in the face of these decisions[[24]](#endnote-20) [[25]](#endnote-21) [[26]](#endnote-22) [[27]](#endnote-23) ; they were just not listened to, certainly by government and in the early days not by the media, with a few notable exceptions; for example[[28]](#endnote-24) . Under pressure from Yvette Cooper and other largely women MPs, parliament established the Women and Equalities Select Committee in 2015[[29]](#endnote-25), which has made a stream of recommendations which would help to reverse some of the adverse effects on women, but which have been largely rejected by Government.

So what impact has grass roots women’s action had in this climate? There have been some notable campaigns which have had some success, for example on Tampon Tax[[30]](#endnote-26), Coercive Control[[31]](#endnote-27), Sexual Abuse at work and the ‘me too’ campaign[[32]](#endnote-28). These campaigns have in common a significant use of social media both to spread the word and gain support on the issue and to organise marches and other disruptive activities. There has also grown a more active media participation in highlighting issues such as the impact of the switch to Universal Credit on specific individuals which has led to a series of changes and delayed implementation[[33]](#endnote-29).

There has also been some well-publicised local activism. One example is in Bristol, where the grass roots organisation Bristol Women’s Voice successfully lobbied the first elected Mayor to sign up to the ‘European Charter for Equality of women and men in local life’ [[34]](#endnote-30), the first of five UK local authorities to do so[[35]](#endnote-31). This led to the establishment of a Women’s Commission, comprising senior representatives of the City Council, local public authorities, universities, local businesses and local voluntary sector organisations. The Commission in turn established a series of task forces and produced an action plan to further women’s equality within Bristol.[[36]](#endnote-32)

# Concluding Remarks

This paper has necessarily included only an overview of some of the ways in which women and women’s organisations have been active in the field of women’s rights and women’s equality. It is based on examples which have reached the media or otherwise caught the attention of the women’s movement so as to be visible to web-search engines and to have made a difference mostly at national or international level. The author is aware that there are many examples of local or regional campaigns by women which do not have such a profile and it would be valuable if funding could be found for more detailed research.

Nevertheless, this quick overview has been sufficient to show that women’s activism has been ongoing throughout the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, including the separate more recent periods discussed. What varies is the climate in which such activism operates, the extent to which the media and decision makers listen to women’s voices and therefore the techniques used by activists to get their messages across. There have been periods when women have felt that political pressure and strength of argument have been effective. On the other hand, there have been times when disruptive techniques have been needed for women to be heard and change to happen. In recent times ‘disruptive action’ has taken the form largely of social media campaigns and women’s marches, some of which have gained traction in the wider media and in turn to changes in government policy (to the extent necessary to quieten the media).

However, such action has not yet had the effect of making decision makers listen to the many voices of women as a general rule; the ‘feminist democracy’ has not yet been achieved. Whilst we have a government either unbelieving or uncaring of the adverse impact their policies have on women’s lives, women activists may well conclude that disruptive action and mass grass roots engagement are necessary for their voices to be heard; the disruptive nature of women’s campaigning is likely to continue to grow.

So, to answer the question put in the title of this paper: it is likely that it is the government’s general attitude to women and equality which has led to the current trend towards disruptive activism rather than austerity per se, and that austerity is a symptom, not a cause, of that uncaring attitude.

# References

1. Prepared for presentation to “Feminist Engagements with Austerity”, a symposium held on 10th January 2019 at the University of Bristol. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dr Longworth chairs the women’s equality network, Fair Play South West

   <http://www.fairplaysouthwest.org.uk/> and has an Honorary Doctorate from the University of the West of England. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sue Cohen, Margaret Page, Diane Bunyan and Jackie Longworth, 2017: “Feminist democracy in a Brexit environment - a political dynamic more than hegemony. *When you do things together with others, you hold that inside you - a glimpse of the world you are trying to create.”*

   Presented to 13th Conference of the European Sociological Association, ESA 2017, Athens, <http://www.fairplaysouthwest.org.uk/images/ESA_Final.2.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. <https://theconversation.com/meet-the-matchstick-women-the-hidden-victims-of-the-industrial-revolution-87453> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmeline_Pankhurst> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/wojtczak/bodichon.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
7. <https://tuc150.tuc.org.uk/stories/dagenham-womens-strike/> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
8. <https://www.bl.uk/sisterhood/articles/womens-liberation-a-national-movement> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
9. <https://www.bl.uk/sisterhood/timeline> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
10. Sue Cohen, Margaret Page, Diane Bunyan and Jackie Longworth, 2017: “Feminist democracy in a Brexit environment - a political dynamic more than hegemony. *When you do things together with others, you hold that inside you - a glimpse of the world you are trying to create.”*

    Presented to 13th Conference of the European Sociological Association, ESA 2017, Athens, <http://www.fairplaysouthwest.org.uk/images/ESA_Final.2.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
11. <https://www.singleparents.org.uk/about-us/span/our-history> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
12. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/59/equality-between-men-and-women> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
13. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/search.html?qid=1546446655981&DTS_DOM=EU_LAW&typeOfActStatus=ALL_DIRECTIVE&type=advanced&lang=en&textScope1=ti-te&textScope0=ti-te&DB_TYPE_OF_ACT=allDirective&orText1=gender&andText0=women&SUBDOM_INIT=LEGISLATION&date0=ALL:01011970%7C20121997&DTS_SUBDOM=LEGISLATION> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
14. <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/equality-and-diversity/doc/gender-equality-timeline.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
15. Based on fundamental Treaty obligations on equal treatment of women and men, a series of EU Directives were brought into UK Law which assert women’s rights in employment and receipt of goods and services. Some important ones include: the Directive on equal pay for men and women (75/117); the Directive on equal treatment of men and women in employment (76/207, as amended by Directive 2002/73); the Directive on equal treatment of men and women in statutory schemes of social security (79/7); the Directive on equal treatment of men and women in occupational social security schemes (86/378, as amended by Directive 96/97); the Pregnant Workers’ Directive (92/85); the Directive on the burden of proof, generally establishing that the burden of proof in cases of sex discrimination lies on the employer (97/80).

    There were also a number of decisions on interpretation made in European courts which established, amongst other things, the rights of pregnant women and pension rights of women. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
16. UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
17. <http://genderandsecurity.org/projects-resources/research/gender-budgets-experience-uk-womens-budget-group> [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
18. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/59/equality-between-men-and-women> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
19. Gill Rubery, 2002: “Gender Mainstreaming and Gender Equality in the EU: the impact of the EU employment strategy”; Industrial Relations Journal 33:5, ISSN 0019-8692 <http://www.eif.gov.cy/mlsi/dl/genderequality.nsf/0/9E015C850578EF53C2257A750029B512/$file/Rubery.pdf>

    [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
20. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/public-sector-equality-duty> [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
21. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=45a5a7f5-ffbd-4078-b0b7-4bfcccab159d> [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
22. <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/a-cumulative-gender-impact-assessment-of-ten-years-of-austerity-policies/> [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
23. <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/universal-credit-briefing-uk-womens-budget-group/> [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
24. <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/the-impact-on-women-of-the-coalition-spending-review-2010/> [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
25. <https://wbg.org.uk/category/analysis/uk-budget-assessments/> [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
26. <http://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/why-is-the-british-coalition-government-undermining-the-equality-act-and-what-can-be-done/> [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
27. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/may/20/women-coalition-government-equality> [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
28. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/03/domestic-violence-refuge-crisis-women-closure-safe-houses> [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
29. <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/women-and-equalities-committee/role/> [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
30. <https://www.change.org/p/george-osborne-stop-taxing-periods-period> [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
31. <http://www.saferplaces.co.uk/news/domestic-violence-law-reform-campaign-achieves-criminalisation-of-coercive-control/> [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
32. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=8709c721-6d67-4d1f-8e30-11347c56a7c5> [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
33. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/universal-credit> [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
34. <http://www.ccre.org/docs/charte_egalite_en.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
35. <http://www.bristol-business.net/mayor-ferguson-to-commit-bristol-to-sex-equality-charter/> [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
36. <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/33055/EU+Charter+for+equality+between+men+and+women%2C+Bristol%27s+Action+Plan.pdf/ddb9bbe0-1e78-4af8-b65f-82870cd53519> [↑](#endnote-ref-32)