

Rebuilding Gender Equality in the UK: the challenge for the social sector

The soundtrack to 2016 was a steady hum of casual, hateful misogyny, previously the preserve of private conversations in members clubs or pubs, now expressed proudly in public.

During the year a series of events unfolded in quick succession which, individually, would have shocked to differing degrees, but taken together suggested achieving equality for women is further from us than we thought. In the UK, we saw the brutal murder of Jo Cox MP by a far right extremist man; the Conservative Party leadership contest which fetishized motherhood; the decision to leave the EU which could herald the end of many of the employment rights that currently protect women in work; and a Presidential election campaign in the US, played out all over UK media, which showed that hatred, misogyny and casual sexism is no barrier to being elected President of the United States.

Alongside this was a daily diatribe of abuse on social media towards women who dared to lead or speak out on politics, sport, culture or economics. Paradoxically, in 2016 we reached a high point in female political representation: three of the four nations of the UK were led by women; the Leave and Remain campaigns in the EU Referendum both had prominent female spokespeople; Angela Merkel remained the most powerful leader in Europe; and the US had its first serious female contender for President. Clearly there is more to gender equality than women being in prominent leadership positions.

For many years, it has seemed that the general agreement in the UK was that overall, gender equality was a force for good for the country. Whilst there were broad interpretations of what this meant in reality, there was an apparent consensus that equality between women and men was something to strive for. This was reflected in public policy and legislation and in the changing cultures of institutions and organisations up and down the country. However, the events of 2016 suggest that outside of these places, support for gender equality is more equivocal.

For those of us committed to gender equality, 2016 was a wake-up call.

We must learn lessons from 2016 which will help rebuild a consensus on gender equality that the majority of people can support. We must consider how the UK can become a gender equal country and secure the support of the greatest number of people in the process. These are not abstract questions; this is not a ponderous activity – it is a matter of great urgency: if we fail to grasp this issue now, we will reverse any gains we have made. This is a major challenge for the social sector (particularly for those organisations and individuals striving for gender equality) including those that fund the sector.

Having worked in and around the women's sector for almost 20 years I am conscious of how much has been achieved on women's equality in that time. There has been significant progress in understanding the causes and consequences of women's low pay and the gender pay gap; raft of legislation have been introduced which increased parental rights in the workplace; there is a clear understanding about the benefits of affordable childcare in both increasing equality between children from different backgrounds, and enabling mothers to enter paid employment. In addition, we have enjoyed almost 20 years of the National Minimum Wage of whom the main beneficiaries have consistently been women, and the expectation of most women today is that they will be in paid work for most or all of their adult lives.

Alongside this, there have been phenomenally successful campaigns highlighting the daily sexism that women face throughout their lives and targeting newspapers which publish images of naked young women. There has been a fundamental shift in thinking and understanding about how male violence and abuse affects girls and women with increased awareness of issues such as FGM, forced marriage and so called 'honour' violence. This has hugely influenced the political and public discourse on these issues as well as how services are delivered to address them. Almost all of these political, cultural and social changes have been brought about because of concerted effort by individuals and organisations working in and around women's organisations in the social sector.

But much more needs to be done to change the everyday lives and experiences of women.

At work, women still face the gender pay gap, pregnancy discrimination, a lack of part-time or flexible working opportunities and a lack of affordable childcare. This is by no means an exhaustive list. The lack of choice (at best) or discrimination (at worst) often means that women end up spending their lives in low paid work or leave the labour market altogether. At home, women are still more likely to be the main providers of care to children and dependent adults. They're also still more likely to be lone parents, and if they are a young mum, constantly vilified for their 'life choice.' In their everyday lives, women and girls are at high risk of being sexually harassed and assaulted by men and the majority of women who are killed are done so by their partner or ex-partner. All this is in a country where sexism still pervades our culture and government cuts to welfare have a higher impact on women than on men. Time and time again, public policy fails to adequately address women's needs or reflect the reality of their lives.

Key challenges for the social sector

So the need for a vibrant, funded, empowered, energised social sector which actively supports women and promotes gender equality in the UK is vital. The social sector is full of individuals and organisations with expertise and energy working on a range of causes with the aim of tackling gender inequality, empowering and supporting women and challenging the consequences of sexism and misogyny on society. All of the rights that have been won for women in this country have been done so by using the collective expertise within the sector, working with allied organisations as well as those in political and public life to create real social change towards gender equality.

However, in reality, the women's social sector is dangerously constrained and facing three significant challenges.

Firstly, it has become harder and harder to campaign. In the past twenty years, the balance of funding has shifted relentlessly from campaigning and advocacy towards service delivery. In part this is because of a political culture which has questioned the validity of the social sector doing campaigning (this has been a particular criticism of charities in recent years) and the introduction of legislation which has caused confusion within the sector as to the types of influencing and campaigning work organisations can undertake, particularly at election time.

This has run parallel to a funding climate which has pushed for more and more specific, tangible outcomes more suited to service delivery than campaigning and advocacy. As a consequence, organisations are increasingly expected to deliver a service to individuals facing very specific crisis often in a very tight timeframe, than campaign to change laws, policies or public attitudes which may be the underlying cause of the crisis. It is virtually impossible for organisations to undertake campaigning and advocacy work without the funding to do it.

Secondly, the women's social sector is increasingly fragmented and this reduces its abilities to build strong alliances (inside and outside the social sector) which can shape the public and political discourse on gender equality. The women's sector is made up predominantly of small organisations

spread across the whole country, working on a vast range of issues, competing for scarce funding, airtime and influence. Many of these organisations are operating with little funding but sizeable targets to deliver services to women facing crisis. They have scarce time or resource to pool expertise and knowledge to develop the big 'blue sky' thinking about the future of gender equality in the UK.

The fact is people don't stop having the ideas, they just run out of ways of progressing them in between all the other things they have to do. Strong alliances of organisations would help to combine the expertise and energy that runs through the women's sector into a powerful force for good

Thirdly, many of the views held sacred within the women's social sector are outdated and stale. It can appear insular, creating echo chambers which calcify thinking about how to create the social change that is needed. This issue is fundamental to the future success of building a gender equal society in the UK. The women's social sector has to be bold and brave if it is to continue to shape public policy and attitudes. It must harness the knowledge and expertise that exists within and around the social sector *across the whole country* in order to rebuild a consensus of what gender equality means in the UK in the 21st Century. And it must expand the focus of its work to include broader public policy issues which affect women's lives.

Importantly, the women's social sector must take people along on this journey, using this as an opportunity to listen to people so they are heard; meet people where they are, not where they 'should' be. It should do this in order to refresh its language, reframe the arguments and build an honest appraisal of the future.

These three challenges sit alongside the apparent nature of the women's sector. As it currently exists, the women's sector operates on an axis, tipping from one big idea to another every decade or so. Each time it tips, resources and energy flow in one particular direction, often to the exclusion of others. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the focus was on women's representation in politics and public life and women's economic empowerment, as it had been for some time; in the mid-2000s it started to tip towards tackling sexism, harassment and violence against women and girls and it has remained facing that direction for several years now. Each time it tips, it leaves other issues in the dark and the cold.

Over time, this has created a sector with specialised expertise and focus on a particular theme. In many ways this is a good thing but in reality it often means that, combined with an 'axis' nature and a stringent and unforgiving funding climate, there is limited space for big thinking about the future of gender equality in this country which the sector must engage with.

So whilst there are many organisations across the country with phenomenal expertise on 'women's issues', what is less developed are opportunities for these organisations to influence broader causes of gender inequality, such as provision of public transport and the development of housing. In other words, mainstream public policy matters which impact on women's lives every single day are rarely considered from a gender perspective.

The opportunities to create real change

In order to shape a new consensus on gender equality, new alliances must be forged and expertise pooled across a broad range of issues. And funders must step up to enable this to happen. These challenges cannot be met without resource and intervention: there is no single organisation in the women's sector, or the broader social sector, which can shoulder this responsibility alone. In

addition, there is unlikely to be *more* money in the social sector (and the women's sector is one of the worst funded parts of the social sector) so the funding for this needs to work hard and work well.

2017 has given some hope to many of us working in and around the women's sector, as events such as the Women's March which took place in cities around the globe, appeared to galvanise women and men to challenge the potentially disastrous consequences of 2016. But there remains much cause for grave concern and the long term sustainability of these events to address the fundamental inequalities of society is currently unclear.

We need some radical, innovative and brave funders to help create a coalition of the committed, the expert and the thoughtful to build a new consensus, shape what a gender equal society looks like in the next 20 years and help plot the path to creating it. We need to understand women's experiences across their lives now and in the future: women of all ages, social classes and backgrounds. It must be ambitious, it must unmask the problems and it must create the solutions. It must help to shape the kinds of organisations we would need and the kinds of social change we should create to deliver gender equality.

There are successful examples to build on: the End Violence Against Women Coalition has shifted political, media and the public's perception of violence against women and girls; the Women's Budget Group has been doggedly scrutinising UK Government spending from a gender perspective for almost twenty years. Events of 2016 have also shown that campaigns with a local focus are essential for addressing challenges women face. For example, in east London, FocusE15 has tirelessly campaigned to highlight the impact that national housing policy has on young people, on poor people and on young mothers. In Greater Manchester, in response to the high number of white men seemingly in charge of delivering the 'Northern Powerhouse', DivaManc has emerged to ensure women's voices are central to 'Devo Manc'.

We must learn from these organisations, alliances and campaigns as we move towards a new consensus on gender equality. How they get funding is not always straightforward; that they are funded, is essential.

2016 produced a backlash against women and against gender equality, the effects of which will be felt for decades. Those of us who care about creating and living in a gender equal society need to learn the lessons from this. We must pool the expertise and knowledge of those working in and around the women's sector and those outside; we must join the dots between organisations and issues; we must create a new language that centres gender equality in political and public discourse ensuring that public policy and public services are truly for all the public; we must reframe a consensus on gender equality; and we must provide pragmatic solutions to the challenges we are likely to face in the coming years.

This approach could be risky. It could take a long time. And it might not work. But the UK has a long history and solid culture of funding radical ideas which shape how future generations see and experience the world. The urgency of today's challenge cannot be underestimated. Those committed to gender equality in the social sector and amongst funders, need to seize the moment. The opportunity is now.

Rebecca Gill is a 2016 Clore Social Leadership Gender Equality Fellow, supported by [Esmée Fairbairn Foundation](#). She completed this provocation piece as part of her Fellowship. You can contact her via [Twitter](#).